Sehrguey Ogoltsoff

The Rascally Romance



(in a single helluva-long letter about a flicking-short life)

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By Sehrguey Ogoltsoff

Yezznaggomer Village

Kashatagh, Armenia

to Alexander ('Esa') Plaksin

27 years of snailmail communing

made us friends, brothers, comrades-in-arms

See you, buddy

You know yoursel

~ ~ ~

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~ ~ ~

Foreword, a sort of

Excuses & Apologies

Haunted by crush landings in however modest try at giving fantasy a free rein, aggravated, on top of that, by being all thumbs at spinning yarn, I am cornered and left out any other option but telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In other words, no merry sallies

outside the straitjacket of my personal experience. Such, muchly rueful, limitations cancel any hope to ever reach the stardom of the literary conveyer-line celebrities bell-jingling as requested by the bestselling practices at the fantasy, science, thriller, mystery, action—each and every, you name it—twist of fiction in the field... Born to crawl, go and fly a kite.

Still—poor, yet proud—I hereby declare that not anything at all would fit under your skin glib and smoothly, neither would you offhand pull off any fancy whatsoever, like, walking thru the walls and/or over the waters, not to mention the shameful inclination for the unhealthy recreational addiction to sucking strangers' blood in totally unsanitary environs. (A sigh.)

Structure & Texture & Content

Sprung from its lengthened title, the novel goes thru this here Foreword, sort of, to be followed by the epigraph—curt, but to the point—and then flows into the narration of not excessive terseness—4 books, all in all—where some passages might arise reasonable doubts whether my pledge of the forthcoming truth was made in good faith.

So again: my objective is keeping true to life as close as I can. But then, not every truth is met with a warm hug, there's no guarantee from someone tossing up their back and yelling, "Bullshit! Not a chance of selling *that* to me!" My most amicable, immediate advice to hard-duty skeptics is to put *The Rascally Romance* off until they, hopefully, got it that even truth can have, now and then, surprises up its sleeve to make a Holy Cow or 2 moo and moo from envy. And if the truth of this here observation stays dim for some obtuse dunce, then it's my turn to envy their blest innocence.

The text flow assumed for this work follows the simplistic block style of separate paragraphs, episodes, parts, and books to make reading engagingly easy. At times you come across a little bit deeper aligned stretches started with "(…" and concluded by "…)", as follows:

> (… this here formatting indicates that you are within a footnote raised up into the text body for reader's convenience while presenting an appropriate comment or tangential point, simple and handy…)

Quotations are served on separate lines offset, emphasized, semi-bold, like this:

" Shine! Shine on! You! Crazy Diamond!

Last but not least, watch out for the only picture someplace in the text validating that all this is not just another screenplay for one more animation blockbuster and stuff but just as is. If this is not the most ergonomic approach, I don't know what else can be.

And, yes, my main concern throughout the work was providing adequate fabric to pull over so elegant framework. Stay assured, neither jerky sketches nor psycodelic splotches, nope! I/we/us were/are/and will be pulling for simple machines and leverage lucidity. I mean you don't have to

sharpen your comprehension's edge by use of this or that dope for following twirly quirks, and fancy whimsicalities, and cerebral-tissue-busting niceties.

Though a first-person story, *The Rascally Romance*, nonetheless, is not a swaggering report on Me, Myself and The Number One. No, I'm not up for narcistic self-portraits. What? This mean and stupid rascal *me*? Alas, but not, 'tis gone, 'tis gone! So, pray, desist! It's sooner, a cross-section of the whole generation. The unvarnished Night Watch of the period, if you like, from the most breathtaking, unequaled, and fascinating era since the Creation.

Now, full of bitter comprehension, I witness the glorious period packed, cinched, and sealed, tight and proper, 2 labels, crisscross—«stagnation»><«restructuring»—all ready get dumped into the bottomless bin of Past. Yet, neither smart labeling nor shifty package tricks would ever obscure the fact that the entire history of mankind owns no period to match the one when so naively young we were.

Style & Language & Age Restrictions

Sure enough, each and every generation inevitably enjoys or lives thru their own youth, yet some of them miss out to erect an epistolary pillar to mark the fact appropriately.

The erection at hand abides by the style of… mm… How will you name the critter? OK, let's christen it *Rabid Realism* because this particular ball is ruled by Mrs. Naked Truth and no soft soap is handed out here to any written or tacit law.

The style is characterized by noble restraint in choice of means, limitlessly so. All's kept radiantly simple, no need to enroll an online group for joint munching—a chunk a week—to get to juicy innuendos in gnarly concoction by the author along with sniffing out the pans in his pun-kitchen… Not in this case. Firstly, you should be dead to see such honor. Remember that German fellow? The one who unearthed Shakespeare and kicked off the successful ad campaign about his writing skills among his myopic compatriots? He came 200 years after the poor Will's bones went asleep beneath their tombstone. Dig it? Can you read Shakespeare today? It's when those eggheads step into picture to collect their flocks of mutts… But while you and I are still around I tried to make of the process of reading an old good DIY entertainment.

And it would be only fair to note that grim-mouthed pearl-clutching language purists might disapprove of absolutely casual taboo words in *The Rascally Romance*. Fully grasping their venerable point, I would willingly pull along with the sentiment but for the fear to look a petty diddler. In a true-to-life presentation, you just cannot hold back them those words because life, as it is, would differ from a family movie. For which reason, I expressly discourage any person under 18 years of age to read any further.

I am serious: DROP IT RIGHT AWAY, KID! Before it's too late...

Technical Notes & Self-Appraisal

Letters are not supposed to be split into chapters or parts—which technique would only push the addressee towards unnecessary associations— they just flow on and on, and on, to their end. However, leaving Reader without any map or compass midst hundreds upon hundreds of pages in any direction, depriving them of sort of a guiding star or two seems nothing but inhuman sadism. Not my style, eh? Gentlemanly full of caring compassion for humanoid brethren and sistern, I couldn't suppress kindhearted addition of *The Table of Contents* to the work.

Though what else could you expect of a fucking philanthropist, eh?.

Acknowledgments & Disclaimer

I thank you all, whose names appear in the tale, as well as those who are not in here (you are indefinitely more in numbers and your contribution to *The Rascally Romance* having been written after all is equally important).

And of no less significance is Your, Dear Reader, tagging along up to this very line. Because any book can only be produced by the collaborative team of 2: the reader and the author. Thank you, I—(dead serious and no horsing)—am hugely honored by Your most kind cooperation.

And now we've just reached the point when everyone has to decide for themselves whether to return to their pursuit of customary business and/or pleasures—to all those pet joys, and daily problems alongside with habitual rewards and outlets befitting people of sober good sort, which (between the two of us, as one buddy-teammate to the other) might be the most reasonable course because you never know what insidious vortexes and currents might lurk out there—or keep rowing on ahead, past and beyond the popping buoy of this here Foreword, a sort of...

Whoa! After such a rambling passage I do have to shut up and take a breather, so feel free to use the lull for making your informed decision...

To be frank, it doesn't matter how randomly or strictly Your cons and pros are scattered for the choice, and stay assured there's no way to dump the blame on me because of the disclaimer to wind it all up—

Regardless of which tack you pick, you'll never be the same hereafter

˜~˜~˜

Epigraph:

Looks like that's it,

In any case, as of yet,

And even if not quite,

Still, sort of, may be,

Because when otherwise,

”Hey, you!.“

Bang and – a-ha!.

Vladimir Sherudillo

~~~~

~ ~ ~ The Birchbark Sketches

...Varanda...

...a handful of random sounds...

...some sonorant nothing... as any other name...

At this distance, the river itself is nothing but a discordant growl of water in nonstop tumbling over them those bulky boulders littered at random to block the way, ramming vainly into their blunt pates, maybe temples, to only get split by their huge indifference into maddened spits, and spill around the gobs of splashy froth, and keep rolling forth in unremitting helter-skelter on, and on, and on without ever getting outside the trap of Here and Now, fixed within futile breakout from nowhere to nowhere, under hollow tam-tam taps, not to time neither in key, by the rounded gravel at the bottom of its riverbed...

And what about the fit duration, Doc? Seems like setting it down to infinity plus this one day, would be close enough… *Nations been risen and passed away*, to quote the famous lecture by sage Abu-Lala before his string of camels, while this river runs here and still has to, thru all those ages upon eons ever since before the beginnings of time.

Changes in the mountain rivers are pretty negligible, except for those in their names. Sure bet, the Stone Age hunters had other sound combinations as for this here stream because all flow and everything changes, handles as well... Now, taking into account the whole multitude of roamers that ever trod these banks, you can’t state who’s runnier: the dateless river of Varanda or irresponsible drifters and purposeful undertakers of any shade and warp in the spectrum. And here am I, a casual bum from endless series, neither the first nor the last by this omnipresent flow.

...extreme pleasure, bro, from your spectacular malarkey... and while you’re at it how ’bout pinning down this “I” of mine, eh?.
~~~~

A minor spill, considerably dehydrated and motionless for the moment, stretched next to the good ol' hole thru which all of the future tumbles away into the past—a relay-pipeline from a snotty noddy kid to a grumpy, flea-bitten curmudgeon, yet both share one common thing: this ubiquitous word of "I".

...me too, me too!. don't leave me out!. I'm also somewhere in between them those two, on our everlasting journey from the junior to the senior, for even though idling now on this bank I still go with the flow...

" O, water! We be of one blood!

...whoa, man!. what are you up at? acting a freakin smartie?. who cares a flick about your quotation frills at this time of day?.

Yes, time remains the laziest in our assembly, uncaring, has dozed off in earnest about my one-person tent. The twilight outside the well-bleached nylon wall will snail for long along its way to thickening into the dark of night.

...right, then why not to whittle the drag away by something useful, eh?.

...like, to compose the letter promised to your daughter... what'd you say?. we've got the promises to keep, remember?. especially when there's not a flake of chance to fall asleep so early...

...just only watch your mouth, pardner... easy about them those f-f..er..fumbling quotations?.

~ ~ ~

Hello, Liliana

(...a hugely nicer name than "Varanda", eh?.

...shut up and mind your business!.)

Seems, I do start at last the letter promised to you at our encounter in Kiev… What for? To marshal a chain of self-excuses and belated explanations, to claim not guilty, absolve my flawless self?. Anything can be explained, yet none redone. However, given the word was given, I've only got to keep it...

Hard it was to stomach your official correctness and the excessive use of "You" in plural to keep me at a proper distance, "Of course, Sehrguey Nikolayevich..." "Not exactly, Sehrguey Nikolayevich..." *Oboy*! I began to resent my own patronymic, yet faced the flogging without a flinch, as fits a manly man.

Meting out “Daddy” to a stranger popped up from the Internet vistas is not an easy job, more so if he looks nothing like the Mr. Pretty Guy sitting in your Mom’s album... Some obscure mujik, gray hanging beard... Where is Daddy of your dreams who you’ve missed since your early childhood? You dreamed of that Daddy, not of this old man. No, thanks! Accordingly, our farewell hug at the railway station was just put up with—not a big deal for a woman nearing her thirties—and that’s it. The glacial ice retained its hardness, not a micro crevice cracked the cold surface, the gardens never splash in bloom, nor were they filled with lively cheerful chirps of blackbirds, thrushes, tits, and starlings injecting their joyous trills into the triumphant blare of fanfares at The Happy End. The stranger who failed to become anything but a stranger let you go and I promised write you a letter. That way we parted, two strangers, at the Kiev Railway Station for Long-Distance Trains....

Still of the two of us, I’m better off because so more of you are there in my life than you will ever have of me in yours, much more... I easily can recollect your kick at my nose as you turned over within your mother’s belly. As well as that sterile white cocoon in my arms which I walked with all the way from the maternity hospital and you sleeping inside so calmly... Up to this day, the video record in my mind where you’re walk dancing in the string of your kindergarten partners round the Xmas tree warms my heart. The most beautiful kid is you, straight fair hair in a middle bob, a quilted vest of black silk, red pantyhose, and felt black high boots, so tiny...

I remember lonely Sundays—not a living sole but us—at the empty playgrounds of another kindergarten in the neighborhood, forlorn and quiet on days-off, which we frequented for you to take a ride on the swing pended on two iron rods. At swaying, the swing screeches pierced the still somnolence about the playgrounds strewn with the fallen leaves. Those shrieks, so like to sorrowful gull howls, gripped my heart. Because I was just a weekend Daddy… On weekdays I was far away, working like a dog, a mule, a slave at The Construction Train 615, aka SMP-615, at various building sites in the neighbor region to earn by zealous, selfless labor an apartment for our young family, and have a home, sweet home for us….

Then there arrived that weekend doomsnight and, in the narrow bedroom divvied up by your grandparents from their 3-room apartment to give a start to our young family, laying on the hand-me-down double bed next to my beloved wife, your mother, I was crushed into pulp by the road roller of her story… A couple of days before the weekend, a friend of hers took my wife for a ride in his Volga GAZ-24, drove miles away from the city to the Hare Pines Forest alongside the Moscow highway, which he left and parked among the trees... He leaned to her side to take from the glove compartment, just over her knees, a bottle of champagne… a mellow tune poured suavely from the radio in the dashboard whose soft demi-light assisted in stripping the foil off the cork... She sipped a bit and sadly said, “Please, take me home.” And he obediently started the motor....

The whispered briefing on the unswerving chastity of my wife dried up sunk into deafening silence tolls. Stretched on my back, spread-eagled under the suffocating mass of the walls toppling in a mute avalanche, I had only one thing to hold on—your innocent breathing somehow reaching me from your cot in the narrow corner. The air felt dense and oddly liquid, the inhales left some oily, stale aftertaste. Mighty severe grip squeezed my heart and, to withstand the pressure, it turned into a hard flintstone. The only good news that the mucky,

pitch-black darkness empathically hid the odd icy teardrop which rolled out of the corner of my eye and crept so soundlessly slow down my temple to get lost midst the hair roots... the last tear in my life... Later on, that trail was deepened by wrinkles digging over the temple skin surface but never again no other tear left my eye in any direction. Except for the tears wrung out by high winds but those do not count.

(...back to the usual dull drool, sissy wimp?. of topple-tumbling lumps of hopes to squash the poor weakling against the anvil of his own heart which happened petrified, safe and proper, and in good time too?.

...be a man, buddy, and seek solace in simple truths, whose simplicity makes them so peerlessly unrivaled in their inevitable surety... and the truth is that no busting your balls at construction sites, no sunburns or frostbites will remove or postpone the pending next time, where she won't say, "Let's don't," and start instead to catch the trick of having it in the environs of the GAZ-24 interior...

...or else this one for your consideration, undisputed because of its simplicity: the most vivid recollections of the delights past can't fetch the joy back, yet just a speck of mopish memory flits by and – *bang*! the pain, suppressed, ditched, gone ages ago, pops up afresh to bite you meanly... it makes you wince even here, by the unknown river running through the middle of nowhere, thousands of kilometers away from the crumpled bedroom, after millions of instances of passing the ubiquitous relay baton of "I" from one I on to the next one...

...I tell you what, my dear I... heal yourself with the same dog's hair... got bitten by a simple truth, eh?. peen it with as simple a tool!. bust the bugger with the wedging edge of a wider grammatical approach, proceed from "I" to "we"... who are we after all?. some shaved and powdered or greasy, bristly, shaggy (whichever is dictated by current fashion trend) cartload of shifty primates... each jumping member must abide by the group's rules and no trick will ever get you off the hook... ignorance of a law serves no excuse, nor gives a chance to dodge its application to you, right?. now then, comfort yourself with this simple truth, wipe up your mawkish slobber and wait if it'll dissolve that nasty clutch on your balls core, maybe...

...oh, shut up, man!. such stuff is not for female tender ears... hmm... seems, like, I'd better give it a start over...)

~ ~ ~

Hello, sweetheart

Though our brief live meeting did not bring you to calling me "Dad", I can't help being sentimental addressing you...

The day before yesterday in the late afternoon, executing the plan shared in my latest email, I climbed the heights in the neighborhood of the ghost village of Skhtorashen to pay a call on the

local immortal—two-thousand-year-old Plane tree, the oldest denizen of the Mountainous Karabakh.

The walk along the scorched ruts in a desolate dirt road winding up the slope would be a pleasure but for the oppressive August heat and my eyes kept unwarranted scanning the steep ahead to pick out the signs of the water-spring asserted by all who had ever visited the place.

Most springs in the Mountainous Karabakh are supplemented with the water-managing structure traditionally made up of a retaining stone wall carved into the slope to protect a 5-6 meter long trough of roughly hewed stone slabs, the other wall (short, just to befit the trough's width) meets the longer one at the right (and only) corner and is rigged with a stub of iron pipe stuck out from its middle above the trough butt. The softly lapping stream of cool clear water runs from the pipe to fill the stone bowl embedded in the wall for thirsty cupless people, and falls from it into the knee-deep trough for cattle and other animals to drink. Brimming up the trough, the water flows over its left end and moseys meandering down the slope.

However, the water-spring by the giant tree was uncustomary flipped, with the water running in reverse—from left to right. And one more surprise by the backward spring, inability to quench my thirst which, all along the climb started at the roadside diner by the turn to the town of Karmir-Bazaar, prodded me on with the alluring visions of gently bubbling current, but no... Because I ran into a *mahtagh*.

> (… The two most frequently used and thrilling with their depth and beauty bywords in Armenian are:
>
> 1. *tsahvyd tahnym*; and
>
> 2. *mahtagh ahnym*.
>
> Of which the first means, "I'd haul your pain". Literally. Just 2 words, yet what abysmal, unfathomable profoundness!.
>
> As for the second pair, it make a vow of doing sacrifice—*mahtagh*. Normally, they do a *mahtagh* as the confirmation of happy outcome. For instance, when a dear relative was dangerously ill, yet recovered or, say, survived a car jump down a gorge, then it's high time to do a *mahtagh* for which end any variety of domestic animals can be slain and offered as a sacrifice reflecting the bypassed danger's dread, as well as the prosperity of the person in charge of *mahtagh*-doing.
>
> The sacrificial flesh must be shared among the relatives and neighbors to which they would proclaim the traditional felicitating formula, "*Let the offer be accepted*," or else it's not a *mahtagh*. Still and all, the *mahtagh's* being edible is not the point; you may do it even with a second-hand outfit, donating a pair of worn-out but still sturdy jeans to some poverty-stricken wretch. Giving is the essence of *mahtagh*, some kind of offering

to be registered by the unseen, unknown forces that are in control of fate, aka chance, aka fortune…

It does not take exorbitant IQ to figure out, that sacrifice to so murky figures calls into question the omnipotence of Acting Gods from leading religions in this best of worlds. However, the reverent religions have long since checked and learned from their bitter experience what hopeless waste of efforts is straining to eradicate certain pigheaded customs that still have a pull among the irresponsible segments in their respective congregations, a hell of a lot of an uphill job to get just a fig if any, so they wisely turn their blind eye to jumping over the fires built on the shortest summer night or round dances designed for seeing the winter off, or *mahtaghs* and other suchlike activities. What can't be cured must be endured. Dammit!

Unrestricted repetition would dull anything and any, however profound, byword would turn a gutted fat-chewing stripped of poesy, beauty, meaning:

—*Tsahvyd tahnym* (I'd haul your pain), how's 'bout paying for the potatoes? Forgot?!.

—*Mahtagh ahnym* (a sacrificial offering on me), 2 secs before I gave you 6 a-hundred-drahm coins! Check in your pocket.

—*Tsahvyd tahnym* (I'd haul your pain), I stick here since morning, there are handfuls of those coins in my pockets.

—*Mahtagh ahnym* (a sacrificial offering on me), I'm not paying twice for the same potatoes. Don't wet your whistle too oft when trading.

In the bazaar of Stepanakert, the capital of Mountainous Karabakh, even at a hassle, folks maintain correct, as well as deeply poetic, stance…)

As it was said, a long cool drink from the so-much-longed-for water-spring was not my lot that day, because in the shade of the giant patriarch of a tree there was a huge *mahtagh*-doing in full swing around two rows of tables for a hundred of participants, and from the thick of the festivity there came a loud yell, "Mr. Ogoltsoff!" And presently my arm got grabbed gently, yet irresistibly, by a burly gray-haired mujik who led me up to a young stout woman sitting at the head of the females' table. "You were teaching us! Do you remember me? Who am I?" (...well, anyway, she was taught the word "Mister", but what, on earth, could her name be?.)

"Are you 'Ahnoosh'?"

My wild guess ignited general delight and tender pride, *wow*! their Ahnoosh was still remembered by her name among the teaching staff at the local State University. And her father, the principle *mahtagh*-doer, never loosening his firm welcome clutch, steered me to a vacant place at the far end of males' table, where they immediately replaced a used plate and fork, brought a clean glass and a fresh bottle of *tutovka*, while the toastmaster was already rising upon his feet with another speech about parental love and university diplomas...

The Karabakh *tutovka* (hooch distilled from Mulberry berries) by its lethal force stands on a par both with “ruff” (a fifty-to-fifty mixture of vodka and beer) and “northern lights” (medicine alcohol mixed with champagne to the same proportion). I mean, such a product calls for a duly substantial snack rejecting the principles of veganism, whereas on the rich festive table only bread and watermelons could actually pass a strict vegetarian control. Nonetheless, to uphold virility of vegans, I bravely gulped *tutovka* down after each toast speech and my dinner companion on the right, named Nelson Stepanian (a double namesake of that hero pilot fighter in the Great Patriotic War), took pains to swiftly refill my glass, hiding a hooligan smirk in his sky-blue squint...

And then I was not up to no Planes… I just picked up my haversack bundled with the tent and sleeping bag, and barged away across the slope to find some quiet secluded place, and there, swaying, yet closely attending the process, I rigged up the one-person Made-in-China synthetic tent.

The residual shreds of verticality and blurred self-control were spent for reeling to a nearby Oak tree to take a leak behind its mighty trunk... The turnabout and the very first step towards the erected tent pushed me back and smashed against the bumpy Oak bole... Limp and unresisting, I slid along the crannied bark down to the tree roots and, completely spent, curdled there... The consciousness twilight thickened sooner than the upcoming twilight of the night. The dim modicum of closing horizon circle swerved pitilessly, a surge of overwhelming sickness rolled up to squeeze me, I rolled onto my side and, balancing on the unsteady elbow, honked over a gnarly bulging root, then fell back into the hard sharp quirks of bark bumping against the back of my head.

Do fish get seasick?.

~ ~ ~

In the dead of night, its harsh chill woke me. Recovering the ability of upright walking was a knotty task but, eventually, I tacked up to the tent, adding on the way my feeble, yet heart-felt part to the grisly howls, and satanic laughter of jackal packs in their uproar over the nearby slopes.

That was the first night to bring it up for me that certain nights are not easily dealt with, you have to clamber through them to survive till next morning. Terrified by the sharp ruthless claws ratcheting my chest, I lay as low as I could and waited for the dawn as for salvation. It came at last but brought no relief, and though my weak piteous moans were of no help at all, I didn’t have it in me to withhold them—everything was wrung away by the excruciating sickness.

Yet, if I somehow lived through the night (it started to shakily shape in my mind), then this here Cosmos still needs me for some purpose. My first task was to regain myself, assemble me back... The inventory revealed a shortage of the upper denture. I plodded along to the Oak, sat on my haunches and dumbly poked with a twig the shallow puddle of stiff vomit between the roots. Not there... The goodnight hurl was so forceful that the prosthesis leaped half-meter farther off from the puddle for a safe sleepover on the pad of moss; the jackals needed nothing of the kind with

their teeth all there, and divers other gluttonous riffraff of the woods were not attracted by the piece of plastic for twenty thousand drahms…

All that day saw me sprawled under the tree by the tent. I was only able to creep along with the slow progress of the tree's shade like a sloppy woodlouse in the gnomon's shadow on sundial disk… "Don't drink yourself drunk" is a truly sage adage, yet, as once upon a time I tried to drive it home to someone, my brake system entertains a rather peculiar standpoint on this particular subject...

And that same day it became crystal clear that the proximity of the arboreal long-liver was leaving no room for the serene repose and dreamy leisure of untroubled mind... The distant buzz of *mahtagh* feasts replacing each other under the Plane (although not every one was bringing a KAMAZ-truckload of tables for the activity), as well as cows wandering by to and from the water-spring supervised by their teenage shepherds all too eager for communication with prostrate strangers, and occasional passers-by either on foot or horseback gaping from the overly nigh trail at the alien lilac tint of the tent's synthetic, on top of killing hangover, forcibly emphasized the need to find a better spot for my annual taking flight to the hills…

That's why, only this morning, after filling my plastic bottle with the spring water for the trek ahead, I observed the tree closely for a report to you. Indeed, one millennium is not enough to grow as big as that. The lower branches of the giant reach the size of century-old trees. The bulky trunk, carrying that bunch of a grove, has a passage-like cleft in its base to admit the stream of water running from the spring (which, probably, has a say in Plane's longevity), and even a horseman can ride into if ducking low in the saddle…

I also entered the tree and found myself in a damp murky cave illuminated by the dim daylight oozing in through the entrance and the opposite exit from the deep shade under the tree outside. It felt humid and uncomfortable in there. Several flat stones were strewn at random over the boggy ground of the floor to serve besmeared footholds. The sizable barbecue box of roughly welded sheet-iron stuck its rusty rebar-rod legs deep in the quaggy soil a little off the center of the cavity, uneven layers of wax drippings and innumerate melted taper ends well nigh filled the whole box. The dismal damp settings made you long for a soon acquittal, revving up back into the clear morning.

So, out I went to collect my things and, with a farewell glance at the glorious Plane, I pooh-poohed in a mute disgust at all those ugly knife marks left by self-immortalizers always ready to add their memes and esoteric symbols to any landmark which the assholes can only put their hands on.

The oldest of the mark-scars had crept, tagging along with the bark, up to some six meters above the ground. Cut a couple of centuries ago, the upper marks got blurred and distended by the inaudible flow of time into obscure, unreadable, contours over the uneven ripples in the gray bark that pulled the labor lost up, into inevitable oblivion…

~ ~ ~

I didn't go back retracing the route which two days earlier brought me to the famous tree. Instead, my intention was to follow the ridge of the *toombs* (so in Karabakh they call the rounded mountains stretching in wavy chains, under the blanket of grass and woods, to tell them from giant *lehrs* pricking the sky with their raw rocky tors of peaks) by which stratagem I would bypass climbing all the way down to the valley of Karmir-Bazaar and trudging back up the highway to the pass in the vicinity of the Sarushen village.

That's why I took a well nigh indiscernible trail tilting up the steep to the right. I did not know whether my plan was feasible at all but if there's a trail it would eventually bring you someplace, right? And I walked on along it, inhaling sweet fragrance from the infinite varieties of mountain verdure, admiring the fixed waves of merrily green *toombs* flooded with the sunshine, looking forward to the delight from the breathtaking vistas which would unfurl from atop the ridge…

And it turned out just so—a view surpassing the most dainty epithets by Bunin-and-Turgenev as well as the subtlest brush strokes in Ayvazovsky-and-Sarian's pictures—and, against that terrific background, the trail flowed into a narrow road coming up from nowhere to the next *toomb* from whose wood, there were descending, dwindled to specks by the distance, a couple of horses, two men, and a dog.

We met in ten minutes. The horses dragged three-to-four-meter-long trunks of young trees cinched with their thicker ends onto the backs of beasts of burden; the loose tops, peeled of the bark already, kept scratching and sweeping the scorched stony road. Two boys and a dog escorted the firewood for keeping their homes warm next winter…

Entering the wood, I met another party of loggers; they were three horses, and three men, and no dog. We exchanged greetings and I asked if there was a way to reach Sarushen if moving from top to top in the chain of *toombs*.

The woodchopper in a red shirt sun-bleached by the decade it weathered—a well match to the drum-tight skin in his face presenting his skull structure in detail—replied he been heard of such a trail but never tried himself, and that after another three hundred meters I would meet a one-eyed old man cutting wood up there, who should certainly know. I walked as far as I was told to, then another three or five hundred meters, but never heard an ax; the old man was, probably, enjoying a snack break combined with a good smoke and sound nap…

Before reaching the top of the *toomb*, the road split into multiple paths. I picked the one of a more promising width but soon it just gave out as if it never was there at all. A pathless mountain wood stood around where you can't walk without grabbing at the tree trunks—trunkhanging, a thoroughly tiresome recreational activity, it must be confessed. I omitted climbing the summit in an attempt to outflank it while looking for a passage to the following *toomb* in the ridge.

Suddenly, there cropped up the feeling of some odd change. The sounds of summer wood died away, the daylight dimmed into a weird twilight dissolving the sunlit patches between the bushes and on the tree trunks. What's up, man? A flash-mob of clouds in the sky?

It took a couple of puzzled looks around to get it—instead of lofty giants interspersing diverse undergrowth I was surrounded by frequent trunks of peers whose crowns interlocked at four to five meters above the ground into a dense mass of foliage impenetrable for the sun, and it was their joint shade that gave the air that grim uncanny touch.

Something made me look back and eye-contact the beastly intent stare... A jackal? Dog? … ah, none… look at this brush of a tail… a fox no doubt… or maybe a vixen… and surely a young one, never met hunters yet…

“Hi, Fox. I’m not Prince. I am not young. Go your way.”

I moved on, dodging the long web-threads, bypassing and sometimes scrambling through the prickly brier; the fox followed. Who invented the bullshit as if animals cannot withstand your fixed look and have to turn their eyes away? Faking quack!.

And so went we on. Occasionally, I addressed him with one or another conversational clue but he never picked gossip. At one point, I took off my haversack and opened it to angle and throw him a piece of bread.

At first, he didn’t seem to know how to approach it but then wolfed the treat down, and quite efficiently too, keeping me all the time under his most vigilant surveillance. Considering the donor for a potential prey? Easy, schemer, we don’t need no hurry… And only when between the trees ahead there stretched a sunlit clearing, he began to cast evasive looks behind himself and soon blend into the woodwork. Fare thee well, Young Fox from the young forest…

I went out into the clearing to realize that I had almost completed a rough circle about the summit never finding the passage over to the next *toomb*. A couple of decayed roofs peeped from under the distant cliffs. Enough was enough, fed up with the search for an imaginary trail running along the ridge, I switched over to looking for a way to reach the ghost village of Skhtorashen.

The steep footpath soon showed up and brought me to an abandoned orchard of hulking Mulberry trees from where I proceeded to the village spring of delicious water superior to that back by the long-liver Plane.

Then I walked the thirty-meter-long street of two or three houses lost under the crashing overgrowth of blackberry bushes. The cobblestoned street cut abruptly replaced by a barely discernible trail tilting down the slope which faced the Karmir-Bazaar valley.

> (… the village of Skhtorashen was deserted before the Karabakh war, that’s why the houses were not burned down and though barred by blackberry still keep their rotten roofs up.
>
> The village, like many others, got killed by the dimwit decision of the Soviet Leadership on the Resettlement of Population from High Mountainous Areas to lower

places. The USSR, over its seventies by that time, was sinking into senile dotage because political systems tend to follow the life circle of man, their creator.

Servile authorities of the then Mountainous Karabakh Autonomous Region, along with the like polities in other Caucasian regions obeyed loose-brain Big Brother's injunction and finished off more than one village.

I mean, with all due respect to septuagenarians I'd rather skip entering their venerable funny club…)

On the way down the slope, like an incurable bolshie, I made two more attempts at finding at least a minor shortcut, yet both deviations were blocked by deep gorges and sheer cliffs, so the highway met me exactly where I left it two days before, near "The Old Plane Diner".

(… gently is a docile kid led ahead by fate, while stubborn brats are dragged along gripped at their forelock to unavoidably get to their destination…)

After several turns in the smooth serpentine, the highway took a beeline to the pass out from the outspread valley of Karmir-Bazaar.

Up the tilted roadside I trudged along through the repulsive yet somehow fetching stench of the sun-thawed asphalt. Panting, sweating, plodding ahead, I had to move the haversack straps to different positions over my shoulders more and more often, ridiculously often, but all the same at any place after a few steps they dug into the flesh anew and hurt to the very bone. The salt of sweat ate into the eyes that ceased their joyous frisking around to catch a beautiful view or 2, the dull weary gaze crawled along the coarse asphalt under the worn army boots stomping my shadow, which began to gradually grow longer. And yet, at times my eyes took the liberty of casting wishful glances uphill seeking some shady tree nearby the highway, though I knew perfectly well there was not a single such one all the way up to the pass top.

Once or twice, I left the asphalt to slacken thirst with blackberries from the bushes below the road shoulder, looks like this year we're facing the blackberry crop failure or else it was the stretch of barren bushes 'cause I hate to be a bearer of bad tidings... And again my heavy boots were tramping uphill along the steady tilt…

~ ~ ~

To obtain and develop your skills at clairvoyance, don't look for a better coach than mountains... So, when the endless straight ascend of the highway reached the pass top to transform from that point on into horizontal bends and twists dictated by the relief of the *toombs* outside the valley left behind, I could predict with an awesome degree of accuracy that half an hour later the already indiscernible (if watched from this here position) speck of a pedestrian, this here me, would be taking the indiscernible turn to disappear over the farthermost slope of that distant *toomb* and, after ten-to-fifteen-minute walk, before reaching the Sarushen village, I would fork off the highway to follow the dirt road tilting to the bottom of the Varanda River valley. And

there it would be really nice, with lots of shade under the trees, and the spring of cool water running from the rocky river bank…

All happened exactly as foretold, and when the dirt road brought down to the shallow ford across the gravel-filled riverbed before the sharp rise to the village of Sarkissashen, I split and went along the river bank through the live tunnel passing over a Hazel thicket to come out into the wide expanse of an unusually level field stretched matching the foot of the steep *toomb* on the opposite bank.

Try to imagine a football field put almost straight-up, and overgrown with broad-leaf wood up to the very top of that wheeling stadium. Because the steep is so rampant, the tree crowns do not screen each other but climb higher and higher in succeeding rows, each crown sending forth the shimmer of its own—a little bit different—shade of green. Can you imagine this daydream? If so, then you can easily see me too down on this riverbank, stretched on my back under a huge Walnut tree, on the thick mat of moldered foliage from the years past—brittle, soft, dried out.

Here am I to enjoy the orgy of the upward stream of green running over the *toomb* across the river, and relish the deep blue of the sky above, and admire the canopy of broad Walnut leaves sun-bathing in the soft breeze over my head.

Ho-ho! It's damn good to be alive, sprawling like this, thinking thoughts of this or that, or of nothing at all. The only jarring note is the absence of anyone who I could share all this surrounding beauty with... whoops! Forget, cut this one out… I've got used since long that the moments of the like delight only happen when there's no one around… Yet, it's never overmuch to make sure you keep your megalomania in check, tight and proper, and no seemingly harmless thoughts are taken for granted, like, the more space is forked out to a single person, the higher is their position…

Once upon a time, I was flipping thru a discarded relic of a glossy magazine in German. The feature article inside was all about a certain Hoheit Herzog, the owner of a giant chemical concern. In short, he's one of those Highnesses keeping aloof from the political rat races for they've left that petty sport to presidents, prime ministers, contesting parties *und so weiter*, yet the slightest turns of rudder within their enterprises are of the most decisive import for the political course of Germany.

The article was full of eye-candies around the Herzog's close-up against the backdrop of his personal backyard park—a crashing vast scope of trimmed grass interspersed with old well-groomed trees and the couple of the blond-lock cupids of his grand kids playing toy bows between the trees next to his left earlobe.

His forefathers, wandering Jew paddlers, hauled consumer goods from as far as China itself to trade with feudal dukes, and barons, and any other titled medieval bandits. Gentile barbarians paid the sidelocked Shylocks with all sorts of base abuse. And now he's the upper dog, the monarch of a wealthy industrial kingdom. Yet, is he happy? Looked doubtful to me considering Herr Herzog's facial expression smack-bang in the middle of that paid-for-by-humilated-ancestry-and-fully-deserved-by-his-own-merits park of his...

OK, but leaving in peace all them those royals, what about me? Am I happy here, lying on my side beneath the arboreal awning, enjoying whiffs of the soft breeze cooled by the river stream, with all this hell of a lot of space for me and me alone?

Some huge domain, indeed, this field under the thigh-deep rank grass, spiked-mace-like bluish spherical thorns peeping here and there, and that grand Camelot-*toomb* over the stream, as tall as the residential towers bulking up alongside the highway between Kiev and the Borispol Airport. What else would you ask for to feel appropriately happy, eh?

A pretty interesting question if you come to think of it. Alas, no looking-glass in my haversack to knock out a self-diagnosis from the smart expression of my silly mug…

~ ~ ~

This empyrean grabbed my attention six years ago when the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh—newly independent, self-proclaimed, and never recognized by the world at large avoiding pain in the ass except for this or that Mayor Hall scattered in different states and hemispheres—arranged sort of a Pioneer tent camp in this spot for school kids of Stepanakert.

That time Sahtic worked there thru all the camp sessions, back-to-back. My modest proposal to leave our dearest scions to my fatherly care and custody was, quite predictably, scoffed at… not that I pressed for it too much, just making the suggestion was a self-evident token of my good will, right? That's why Ahshaut and Emma had to while away the whole summer by their mother's side, all the three sessions, back-to-back, in the camp platoons befitting their respective age and gender.

The eldest child in the family, Ruzanna, after passing the university exams for her sophomore year, joined them there and picked up the job of self-styled Pioneer Leader. Which position, of course, was made obsolete by the collapse of the Soviet Union leaving alive pioneers only in old movies produced by the Soviet cinematography, but… well, yes, if Ruzanna wants something, I am ready to impart my solace to the relatives of any force major inadvertently popping up in her way... So, she became the Pioneer Leader for everybody at the camp, never paid for doing the job but she didn't care.

After a couple of weeks spent home alone, I got bored stiff by the goddamn mum evenings about our house, and one late afternoon I left the city in the direction of the Sarushen village. On the way, I bought a pack of cookies and some candies from a petty shop in the town outskirts. (By that time in my life I grew wise enough to realize that the joy of seeing Daddy needs a proper follow-up, the sweeter the better.) Hitchhiking, I traveled 20+ km to the village and at dark reached the camp.

Just about the same spot where I am lying now, there stood the folding canvas stool of Camp Director, Shahvarsh, on which no one ever dared get seated except him, kinda local species of the frigging Coronation Boulder in Scotland. And on the broad trunk of this Walnut tree, even then lightning-split already, there hung a single bright lamp, fed by the generator whirring softly

from behind the trunk, the light spilled into the black darkness revealed two long tables of sheet-iron lined head-to-head by the field edge, long narrow benches of the same chilly material were dug in the ground on both sides of each table. Solid black silhouettes of two squat pyramids of army squad-tents bulked in the dark field: one for all the girls at the camp, the other for the boys and Gym Teacher. A little to the left there stood a six-person tent of Caretakers. The formation was concluded by a two-person tent for Camp Director Shahvarsh and his wife, who also embraced the positions of Cook and Paramedic. Deeper in the field, some thirty meters to the right from the tents, a tame campfire was licking lazily with quiet tongues of flame the end of a sizable log—a tree-trunk, actually—cleared of boughs and propelled, as needed, into the gleaming embers of the burned down wood…

All of Camp Caretakers were, naturally, teachers from the city schools, for whom the solitary lamp light was enough to identify me and call Sahtic. Ruzanna came running after. They both were glad to see me, though with a trace of inner strain in Sahtic, prepared to knock off any funny stuff of mine were it not in line with the local customs conceived, shaped and ground for survival ends by quite a few millennia of use.

It was a hard day's night so I didn't feel like horsing about any fundamental values and just behaved. Obediently sat I down onto the cold iron by the iron table hosting the camp dinner in progress, humbly and appreciatively accepted a plate of gruel, a spoon, a slice of bread. And I even ventured a bite off that bread though it certainly was no match for plastic teeth, concealing the rock-hard piece beneath the plate rim, I concentrated on the oatmeal.

> (…How come that 'pioneer' camp, a make-believe keepsake from the happy Soviet times, occurred in the state whose Minister of Education confessed, in a fit of openness, that his Ministry cannot even buy a football for School 8?
>
> Most likely, there happened a target grant from Diaspora Armenians who end summer would be treated to a yummy account full of genuine brimming glee: "Thanks to the $40,000 of your generous donation, all the schoolchildren of the Stepanakert City, the capital of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh, were provided with the unique opportunity to enjoy…")

The progress of the started report to hypothetical donors from presumed grant-rippers was cut short by the happy tweets of Emma snuggling to my side.

I fondly stroke her straight hair and the narrow back of a preschool child, asked empty questions which she responded and asked me back. "And where's Ahshaut? D'you know?"

She pointed at the far end of the following table where the light from the lamp dissolved and mingled with the night around. Ahshaut sat there, forgetful of the meal, in gaping admiration at the high school teenagers who towered about him in raucous cackling of their nonstop rookery... I took the package out from the pocket of my summer jacket and passed it to Emma asking to share the sweets with her brother. She wary moseyed off fading in the dark around the hotly racketing diner at the cold iron table…

Then there was a dinner for adults. Camp Caretakers, all of them females recruited from among the city school teachers, decorously drank wine. Gym Teacher, Camp Director, the precinct policeman from a nearby village, and I kept manly guzzling shots of the traditional *tutovka* hooch. For a snack, we had some small fry, banged in the river with an electric discharge from the power generator borrowed for the purpose from the camp by the precinct policeman earlier in the day. The electrocuted catch was fried then by Cook, aka Paramedic, aka Camp Director's wife...

A group of teenagers approached the table to petition Shahvarsh for his permission to have some dancing that night to which he graciously decreed a half-hour delay for the lights-out in the camp. Meanwhile, I asked Ruzanna about Ahshaut. She answered that he was already sleeping in the boys' tent and volunteered to fetch him, but I said, "No, don't disturb."

The teenagers gathered by the campfire and danced to the music from the loudspeaker box hanging from the tree next to the lamppost Walnut. At first, it seemed rather strange that all of them danced with their backs to the feast of seniors at the sheet-iron table, but then I cracked it: everyone danced with their personal shadow cast off, immense and springy, by the lamplight into the night field. Then Camp Director announced it was enough, switched the generator off, and retired to his royal double tent...

Some of the camping teenagers sneaked, in twos and threes, to squat by the quietly glowing log to tickle each other to uncontrollable grunts, and cackles, and fits of laughter by the invariable jests stuck on top of hit lists since the Stone Age or get scared dead with spooky stories as old as the hills, deep into small hours, under kindly supervision of Caretakers—their school teachers—taking turns in the night shift.

I stayed there till one o'clock before agreeing to go and sleep on a vacant camp-cot in the boys' tent, leaving Sahtic to do her turn by the fire, because I had to walk away at six in the morning so as to catch the bus to Stepanakert…

Years later, I asked Ahshaut why he never came up to me that night. He answered that about my visit he was told only the following day after I had already left the camp. To my question about the biscuits and candies, he responded with an uninformed shrug… I don't blame Emma. At the age of six, to nip on the sly a pack of biscuits which turned up amid that camp rations is the most normal manifestation of healthy selfishness. Yet poor Ahshaut! How does it feel to grow up knowing—even though that knowledge since long has been buried away and securely forgotten it still remains there—that your father did not want to come up to you? From all of the family, it's only you that your father did not want to come up to…

Well, let bygones be bygones or, quoting the byword voiced daily by the latest of my mothers-in-law, Emma Arshakovna, "That's life, man..."

~ ~ ~

Eeewwwww!. Who let them icky blues creep into this hugely luxurious place for me alone?. To hell all the nostalgic mopey crap! It's time for a little knock-up exercising legitimate rights of a hooligan in the forest…

Bypassing thickets on the steep slope, I explore the underwood along the field edge, pulling a broken bough here, a dead sapling there onto the desolate cow path. After advancing in that manner some two hundred meters, I turn about and go back picking up the firewood scattered over the path. With an ample armful of fuel, I come back to the former campsite, then re-track to fetch another bundle; and one more. That's that.

The next step is breaking brushwood for the fire to process "pioneers' fav'rite food-ood-ood", as a sometime jolly Soviet song baptized baked potatoes. Which piece of work I had to do by bare hands equipped not even with a knife. At times the fact of my hiking unarmed astounds people, and they start to pour forth their stock of horror stories about hungry wolves and cruel robbers. As it stands, in all my annual escapes to the wilderness, I've only seen deer and foxes, and a couple of times bear steps, but no robbers ever bothered to ambush me in the *toombs*.

The only but ever present inconvenience is getting jumpy at close unidentified shrieks in the night forest, still I'm not sure if the possession of a loaded AK would improve symptoms. Yes, once I got attacked indeed, while spending the night under a bush nearby the Mekdishen village in my sleeping bag additionally wrapped into a piece of blue synthetic burlap. (The shoddy crap drenches thru in the rain before you say "knife", but that had happened before 2000 when I got this Made-in-China tent.)

It was about midnight, when two wolfhounds, escorting a belated horseman, ran into me nestled under that bush. Damn! What a hell of barking broke loose over my head! Their master arrived at the scene with his flashlight and was stunned by the unseen sight in his native quarters, yet the blue bundle yelled from under the bush that it was a tourist from Stepanakert and let him call back his bloody beasts.

The mujik started the all too familiar hooey about wolves, for which I was not in the mood and just retorted curtly that after his *gumprs* nothing would ever scare me anymore…

And at the sleepover upon the Dizzuppaht, which is the third highest mountain in Karabakh, half an hour after me there climbed up a party of guys from the Halo Trust. So is named the international organization headquartered in Great Britain, who finance and teach techniques of mine clearance to the natives of hot spots at war all over the globe because different conflicting sides have the same nasty habit of setting up lots of minefields to kill as many people from the opposite side in the conflict as possible. The side effect is genocidal decimation of animal populations—both wild life and domesticated—the poor creatures, as a rule, are fully unaware of the areal political situation. We are responsible for who we housebreak. (...whom?. Hmm… I'm not a Sir Winston Churchill, man...)

Now, the local sappers (instructed by native Britons) climbed the Dizzuppaht on their off-duty time at night closing in after a day in the field to perform a pleading *mahtagh*, because atop that

mountain, from time immemorial, there stood a stone chapel which you should walk around, thrice, for your request to get approved by the authorities of fate.

The Halo Trust guys, naturally, did not come empty-handed, they brought a rooster with them for the sacrificial offering. But because of the somewhat impromptu nature of their *mahtagh*-doing, they missed to bring a knife along and were expressly disappointed to learn that neither had I... Yet, the resourceful fellas on-the-fly invented a novel technique and chopped the bird's head off with the piece of a broken bottle collected from the heap of garbage solicitously piled up by all the previous *mahtagh*-doers…

It's only that year when I climbed the second highest (and clean completely) peak in the region, the Keers, I had an imitation of a Swiss army knife, a present from Nick Wagner. It had a whole bunch of things in its handle: a fork, a corkscrew, and even a nail file. I can't remember where I misplaced it afterward.

But, however long were I patting myself on the back, the region's peak number one remains beyond the peacock tail of my vagrant achievements. The front line of the unfinished war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis runs across that mountain. So, if not one side, then the other wouldn't let me pass up or they'd just bang from both sides synchronously.

The point is that manual breaking of dry branches is not a big deal, and before long I readied up two sizable heaps of fuel for the fire. With the first one burned up, the unpeeled (so is the recipe) potatoes are buried in the hot ashes and the finalizing heap goes in the fire restarted upon them. But not right now, first, I have to put the tent up; the sun already gone behind this wheeling football field of a *toomb*, the dusk begins to slowly creep in from over the river…

> (…in every human there sits a pyromaniac...
>
> ***“and then the pyromaniacs partook of pies with Pirosmani”***
>
> Looks like a half-baked jaw-breaker, eh?...then, gradually, a creepy disjunctive question crawls in: was Pirosmani among the banqueters or, after all, inside the pies, turned into toothsome filling?.)

Luckily, I was not able to break this long thick bough when crushing the firewood and now, so as not to set the field and all ablaze, I systematically use it to kill the fugitive spillovers of lively flames. When the bonfire gets bounded by the black ring of burnt grass, the club-armed sentry becomes an idle onlooker considering the merry dance of fire atop the piled wood pieces while the club transforms into a staff to lean my locomotion apparatus onto…

And what do you see in the rollicking tongues of flame or in the sedate embers scintillation?

> (…we were a seed, then a germ, then buds, then branches…)

Now, turning the staff into a poker, I rake their smoldering reminiscences, push them aside to open a hole for a dozen potatoes—dinner and breakfast, 2 in 1... The fire eats wood, I eat potatoes, mosquitoes eat me…

> (…who do not eat, they do not live. Even considerate and prissy crystals devour space when growing.
>
> But no one can ever eat up time because it does not exist at all. Time is nothing but a red-herring for distraction of innocent suckers. What they call “time” is just a series of different states of space. Some place sunlit from the left is morning, the same place sunlit from the right is evening. As simple as that. Day as a unit of time? Bullshit! Day is just the difference between two states of space. An apple adds to an apple to make a pair of them and not a unit of time, damn!.
>
> Oh, sorry!. There, there! Don’t be afraid, sweetheart, gray wolves gone to their forest, no loose ends, all’s under a strict control…
>
> Well, yes, it’s no use denying that space and time, when brought up, make me a bit spacey, quite a very tiny little bit, not noticeable, almost, especially if you don’t watch too closely. Yet, a brush in passing with that sweet couple and—ta-dah!—a short circuit sizzle and I’m emitting some folly accomplished. Kinda reincarnation of that crackpot God's fool, Vasily the Blessed, only cocked up by more earthly matters.
>
> Still and all, I am not a violent case. Not in the least! I swear! And both Devil and God, (alphabetically) might absolutely safely attest that in the course of seizure no one gets harmed in any way because the hooey I pour forth is quite enough to tangle myself completely and—voilà!—here am I, the same submissive genteel yahoo, ready to carry on whatever they see fit to load onto the beast of burden…)

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Genesis

More likely than not, your ken of your own lineage on the paternal side feels kinda rickety, right? In the same breath, I feel comfortably confident in your Mom’s family tree being properly watered and presented to you in detailed feeds by your grandmother. About 2-3 generations, if not deeper.

The reasonable belief that my pedigree was a taboo subject when you were around took a firm root after a surprise letter from your mother breaking the sudden news of my death. Not too sharp though, the impact was softened by a kind roundabout introduction: you were told that your Dad was dead and I should prevent exposure of the child’s fragile psyche to any chance running into the revenant ghost of her drifter parent...

As a spook of quality, I politely kept to my grave ever since. Yet, when in a pub a fella next to me got in the mood for bending my ear with a plaintive tale of his being nobody these days while in his prime he walked the bridge of a nuke submarine as her Chief Mate, I felt a solid right and no scruples to cut his lamentation and drive it back that I used to be a famous pilot tragically killed at the shakedown flights of a jet fighter starting the newest, highly secret, brand... For which unparalleled achievement I was honored, by the way, with the title of Hero of the Soviet Union and awarded the Gold Star medal. Posthumously, of course, and that's a sad pity the decoration didn't find the hero because those lazy sons of bitches never search in earnest…

The bullshit, to be honest, was not an instance of my snappy creativity but a commonplace mass-product because in that romantic epoch, when a single-mothered kid exacted the reasons for the incomplete composition of their family, Mom dished out the traditional stopgap, "Your father was a pilot and he crashed."

The brute facts of life were saved for her bosom lady-friends, "He was a junior bookkeeper, guys, and spread me on his office desk, O, my! Never will I forget that fucking abacus trundling back and forth under my ass…"

Nonetheless, don't expect of me a fine-grained presentation of your roots because my knowledge of the matter is way too shallow and fuzzy because the interest in eugenics was truly frowned at then in no less degree than now…

The name of your father's mother's mother was Katerinna Poyonk and she was brought from Poland by your great-grandfather, Joseph Vakimov, a commissar in the 1-st Cavalry Army of Semyon Budyonny, as a trophy, or maybe a keepsake of that period in the Civil War when the Budyonny's cavalry all but turned Warsaw their spoils.

Their relationship was legalized by the then Civil Registry Office, aka ZAGS, and eight years later my mother, Galina, was born to be followed by her brother, Vadim, and their sister, Lyoudmilla. In recollections of those three, Joseph was very clever. He knew Jewish as well as German languages and was embracing the position of a Regional Trade Auditor in Ukraine. During that period Katerinna had a separate pair of shoes for each of her frocks.

Seven more years passed and, in the late thirties, Joseph got arrested. However, they did not put him before a firing squad to purge away like millions of other "enemies to the Soviet people", supposedly, some clever way was found to buy his life back. He was only deported to a very northern, but still European part of Russia. The family joined him in exile and in the early forties, they all returned to Ukraine to settle in the city of Konotop which soon afterward was captured by the German Wehrmacht.

After two years of the Nazi occupation, when German troops retreated driven westward by the Red Army blows, my grandfather disappeared from home one day before the liberation, together with his bicycle—rather a valuable item in those times.

The next morning, heavy bombardment made Katerinna and her three children flee as far as the suburban village of Podlipnoye, where a shell fragment cut an apple tree branch right above my

mother's head (a telling detail, if not for the odd inches I wouldn't now be composing this letter to you). By noon, the advancing troops of the Red Army liberated both the village and the city. Katerinna came back to Konotop where she brought up, as a single mother, her children — Galina, Vadim, and Lyoudmilla…

Another ten years passed and Galina, the eldest of the three, thru a postal acquaintance met Nikolai Ogoltsoff, a petty officer in the Order of Combat Red Banner Black Sea Fleet. "Postal acquaintance" meant the postman delivering a letter which starts, "Hello, unknown Galina…", and concluded by, "…Send me your photo, please!"

So, on his next year furlough Nikolai, instead of customary visiting his native Ryazan Region in Russia, arrived in the Ukrainian city of Konotop where the width of both his bottom-bell Navy pants and his chest in the deep V-cut demonstrating the striped vest, and the golden-lettered legend "The Black Sea Fleet" above his forehead in the ribbon around his marine uniform visor-less cap whose 2 black tails ended with imprints (also golden) of anchors (one per a tail) hanging loosely from the back of his head, and one more shining anchor (this time of brass) in his polished belt plate impressed the quiet lanes in the town outskirts where he'd been sending his letters in envelopes embellished on behind with the line of his own design, "Fly with my greetings, come back with the promise of meetings!."

And three days later my parents, forgetful in the rush to notify my grandmother, registered their marriage in the Konotop ZAGS…

> (...did Regional Trade Auditor Vakimov set up innocent people after his arrest?
>
> Affirmative. The show had to go on. So you signed anything they put before you of your good will or you signed it as a cripple if not killed by the tortures and beating under the name of interrogation.
>
> Did he collaborate with the Nazi occupants?
>
> Knowledge of the language would give him such an opportunity but then you should suppose he did it gratis, without bettering his housing conditions or procuring a new pair of shoes for his wife. The bicycle also a telling clue—Germans, still having more than a year of war on their hands, could find room for an able-bodied collaborationist in the bed of a truck heading westward… Seems like he was dead scared at the prospect of another round of interrogations when riding his bike—trying to cross in a bath-tub the wuthering ocean of War.
>
> Was my missing grandpa Joseph a Jew?.
>
> Being a commissar in the years of the Civil War, proficiency with the language in question, why, the name itself might serve a bunch of circumstantial evidence for the assumption. However, the high percentage of the chosen people's offspring among the revolutionary leaders of the period does not remove the possibility of exceptions. The language could have been picked up while being an errand-boy and/or shop assistant at

a store of some Jew merchant. As for the name, let's not forget that even such a hardened anti-Semite as Comrade Stalin was his namesake... Still and all, my mother, when introducing herself, preferred to change her patronymic, taking root from an Old Testament handsome character, into its Russianized rustic form: "Osipovna"...)

Her dark mellow eyes Galina inherited from Katerinna Ivanovna (or Katarzyna Janovna?) whose affinity with the tribes of Israel seems doubtful enough.

Firstly, in the red corner of her kitchen there hung a dark lacquered board with some glum-bearded saint (I can't say of which religion or nationality, could be a Catholic as well). Besides, she fattened a pig in her shed, Masha was her name, for slaughter.

But, again, the icon might have taken root as a camouflaging part of the interior in the time of Nazi occupation, while the restrictions of kosher diet can be overruled with the common Ukrainian proverb – "Need teaches eating cakes with lard".

Of course, all these unanswerable questions will arise after the return of your ancestors from their marriage registration at Konotop ZAGS, but we are not to tag on them all that way, we are taking a U-turn so as to trace the line of your grandfather's father's origin.

~ ~ ~

That line is simple, straight, and down-to-earth. In a word, Mikhail Ogoltsoff was a peasant.

In the depths of the Ryazan land, there is the district center of Sapozhok and at nine or eleven kilometers from it (the distance depends on who you ask the question), lies the village of Kanino. My father liked to brag that in its fat days the village had about four hundred households.

The shallow ravine with a sluggish soundless brook rolling along its bottom splits the village into two halves. Back in the blessed days of yore, the stream banks served the grounds for the long-standing folk amusement "Battling Walls", aka collective fist-fight. The men from one half of the village devotedly punched the other-half dwellers, smashing their teeth out to mark some of church holidays or celebrate a mild-weathered Sunday. Yeah, once upon a time folks knew a thing or two about stimulating entertainment…

And so it went on for centuries before sinking into oblivion. Only vague memories remained of Alesha the Saddler, the legendary fighter and obedient son. But his Dad was a truly uptight geezer! "Where to?" would yell he at the scion. "Too filthy rich you are, eh? Back to work and no nonsense!"

And the mighty three-and-thirty-year-old son would stoop his hefty shoulders over the unfinished horse-collar poking it with his awl while all of him was out there, at the lists by the stream, from where little boys ran panting in with the updates, "Oy, Alesha! They are pressing indeed! Ours give in already!"

Yet, the warning snort from his father would keep Alesha silent and concentrated on his toil until many “a-heck!” and “plunks!” of a dogged retreat in the street reached the hut. At that point, Dad would no longer keep his temper down. Springing up to his feet, he would run to Alesha and deal him a huge box on the ear and yell, “Fuck it! Ours bite the dust but this dickhead still sits home!”

But Alesha didn’t hear the whole oration, he's out already, bypassing the battling “Walls” thru the village backyard kitchen gardens because the rules forbid attacking the opposite team from behind, a good game deserves fair play.

“Alesha’s out!” And “the ours” get a second breath right away while the opposite “Wall” show streaks of wavering. Some weaklings start falling down in advance—the rules do not allow to beat a fighter lying on the ground. And Alesha, deeply concentrated, knocks the standing fighters out one after another; and, mark you, without a single f-f..er..foul word... Yep, the village was in the pink then…

The Rural Collectivization in the USSR finished off that innocent merry-making and the well-orchestrated Great Hunger, called to solidify the revolutionary changes in the Russian rustic life, knocked Alesha off, and his father, sure enough, also starved to death…

My father’s mother, Martha, remembered the life under the Czar because at the break of the Great October Revolution she was a girl of about thirteen. Ten years later she was already married to Mikhail Ogoltsoff to bring forth three children: Kolya, Sehrguey, and Alexandra (respectively).

Mikhail lived thru the collectivization phase but the Great Hunger made him pass on and Martha remained a single mother. She cooked soup of saltbush and less edible herbs. Both she and her children were swelling up from starvation but survived.

Then there arrived the era of hard labor at the collective farm, aka kolkhoz, with its miserly paid workdays. Life kept spinning around those “workdays” paid in kind with the same products the villagers produced slaving in the kolkhoz fields, and the collective recreation at the kolkhoz club where twice a month they brought Soviet movies "Lenin in October", "Pigwoman and Shepherd" and other suchlike stuff. To make movie-watching possible, the village lads had to hand-pedal the crank of electricity-producing dynamo machine brought for the show together with the projector and cans of film spools.

In the summer of 1941, Comrade Joseph Stalin surprised everybody calling them in his address over the radio “dear brothers and sisters”. Then he announced the treacherous invasion of the fascist Germany into the Soviet Union, and the village mujiks were driven away to the war.

Germans never reached Kanino though the thunder of the front-line cannonade was rolling in from the horizon. Then in the village came detachments of the Red Army reserve, the mujiks from Siberia with their amazing custom to sit after taking a steam bath in the frosty winter night outside and have a thoughtful smoke in just their pants and undershirts on.

The Siberians left in the direction of the cannonade and soon afterward it ceased to be heard. In the village, pervaded by thick silence, there stayed only women, girls and boys too young to be drafted. And—yes!—the collective farm chairman, a one-armed cripple in the military outfit.

And so it went on and on, not for days or weeks but for months, from year to year. Under the circumstances, there sprang up a veritable sexual quirk permeating the womenfolk. They would gather in one or another hut with a view to inspect one or another cunt from theirs, exchange comments and judgments, evaluate the appeal…

Getting on the scent of this Sapphism Renaissance, the kolkhoz chairman had a crack at eradication of the collective lesbian kink before the rumors of it reached the authorities in the district center, and he called a general meeting of exclusively women and girls in the kolkhoz club.

The male youths participated also, on the quiet. They penetrated stealthily the projectionist booth in the club and, with their jaws a-hanging, witnessed the chairman to cheer the congregation up with all the mighty curses. Repeatedly knocking his only fist against the rostrum top, he took his most solemn oath to cut out that rotten cunt-watching by use of an incandescent iron pry. (I mitigate, in part, the artless charm spread throughout the bucolic figures of speech in the chairman's proclamation.)

My father never knew if the cripple did keep his promise because he (my father) was drafted into the Red Army. Or rather, in his case, it was the Navy but Red all the same…

~ ~ ~

The WWII was burning out but pigged up the cannon fodder as voraciously as always. Kolya, a youth from a Ryazan village, and lots of other youths from other places got outfitted in the striped Navy vests, black pants, black shirts under black pea-jackets and for a couple of months kept at a recruit depot to drill them military basics and know "Attention!" from "Dismissed!" They also were taught to tell between the bayonet and trigger before, finally, loaded, in their anti-khaki uniform on high-speed cutters for a landing operation somewhere up the Danube river in Austria.

But, for all the speed of the landing operation cutters, they didn't get there in time because the fascist Germany had just capitulated and there was no one to attack.

> (…long ago I secretly regretted at this point: eew! they left no time for my Dad to become a hero! Now, on the contrary, I'm glad that he never shot and killed anyone, not even accidentally…
>
> Still, he was considered a vet of the Great Patriotic War and on special anniversaries, like 20 or 25 and so on Jubilees of the Great Victory they always awarded him commemorative medals which he stored in the sideboard drawer but never wore like those vets dangling their collections on their civvy jackets to mark another Victory Day...)

Then his detail were guarding for a couple of months the empty Serpent Island off the coast of Bulgaria, or maybe Romania, from where they transferred him to a minesweeper, a minuscule Naval trawler manned by a tiny crew.

My Dad's seafaring career began with the passage from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk over the ruff Black Sea; it was not a full-blown storm but the sea was pretty choppy... Riding a swing in the park is fun but if you go on enjoying it for a couple of hours the stomach will throw up anything stuck in it from the day before yesterday's breakfast. That sea crossing continued much longer…

When Red Navy man Ogoltsoff came ashore at the port of destination, even the land itself kept swaying under his feet. He tried to puke between the tall timber-stacks lined along the pier, but to no avail. The young sailor sat on the ground just where he stood and, watching the towering rows of timber that kept swaying up and down, decided that he'd inescapably die in that naval service…

> (…you may easily figure it out that was a wrong assumption as long as he had not yet met your grandmother, nor persuaded her to go with him to ZAGS. And your grandmother hadn't yet born three children without becoming a single mother, which constitutes an unprecedented instance in this story under way…)

So, seasickness did not kill my father. He learned to endure the pitching and tossing. He tattooed a blue anchor on the back of his left hand, and on his right arm a swift outline of a swallow in the flight—from the elbow to the wrist—pinching in his beak a tiny letter envelope ("fly with greetings…"); and he furrowed on his bitty minesweeper the vast expanses of the Black Sea, clearing it from the minefields which, actually, is what minesweepers are designed for.

The main difference of naval mines with their land counterparts is that the sea species must be tethered or else they would scatter drifting astray to destroy any ship met on the way without checking whether she was "theirs" or "ours". That's why a cocked up sea mine is fixed with a steel cable to an anchor that grabs at the seabed. The mines—iron balloons filled with air and TNT—soar up in the water not reaching the surface though restricted by the cable length correlated to the depth on the sea route dealt with. And there the naval mines hover, a couple of meters below the surface, waiting for a passing ship to hit any of its spike-like detonators poked out the mine-shell in different directions like in a babyish sketch of the sun.

Thanks to its shallow immersion, the Navy minesweeper passes over the minefield clear of being caught by detonator spikes. In its wake, the boat drags the long loop of thick steel cable over the bottom so as to cut the mines anchorage at the seabed and destroy the loose mines popping up to the surface. For that end a manned rowboat leaves the minesweeper heading towards the mine. The team's task is to fix a dynamite cartridge with the Bickford fuse onto the huge iron ball of the mine. (Which is performed not in a placid park pond but midst unsteady waves in the open sea with the mine's spherical skull heaving up above the rowboat and then falling under it, striving to ram with the horn of a detonator.)

The final step is done by the boatswain from the stern board, a lit cigarette in the firm bite of his disclosed teeth not as a means to show off his daredevilry, it's as a tool readied to set the fuse

off. Now it's caught fire and – Hup! Hup! Ho! Everyone pulls on with might and main, no shirkers at the oars. Away as far as possible from the hiss of the fuse dwindling to the final "BOOM!"—the TNT charge in a naval mine is meant to tear up the hulls of line battleships…

When broken down into constituent elements, romantic heroism just melts away and maritime mine clearance starts to resemble the prosaic job of a tractor bumbling in a kolkhoz field. The minesweeper gets to the assigned water area and furrows it all day long, back and forth, with the cable released behind the stern; and on the following day – to the next area. On the whole, the minesweeper crew's heroism consists in being a good team, and the fact that my father stayed alive resulted from their forthright cooperation.

For example, at the end of a typical working day, Nikolai Ogoltsoff watched over the stern winch when he noticed a mine approaching the boat because its anchorage line got entangled with the minesweeper's loop cable when it crawled over the sea bottom. Now it was being reeled back to the windlass drum. Too late to switch off the winch which would spin on by inertia for a short, yet sufficient, time to drag and slap the mine against the boat. Dad's shirt stood off away from his body like the hide of a beast at the moment of utmost danger, and his roar, "Full Ahead!", was full of such animal force that Captain on the bridge lightning-haste duplicated his order on E. O. T. sending the bell signal to the engine room, the mechanic, Dad's shift-man, did his job promptly, the boat propeller churned up the wave whose pressure pushed the nearing mine off. So the team saved each other...

Five years later there remained no unswept areas in the sea routes and my father was transferred from the minesweeper to a coastguard ship, again in charge of the diesel engine. The following year saw the end of his second term in the Navy service (because of the heavy losses in WWII, before new generations of draftees cropped up, the service term in the Soviet Army was doubled: 6 years in the Army, 8 in the Navy—yes, 2 years more and the only consolation that no other servicemen sport so spiffy breathtaking uniform, golden anchors and stuff) and they offered my father a job in a "mailbox".

~ ~ ~

At those times the USSR had lots of secret institutions, secret factories, and even secret cities, none of which had an ordinary postal address so as to fool enemy spies and leave them clueless about all those secret objects location. As a result, the addressee stopped living in any street or city, he lived in no region neither district and he was referred to in a pretty short way: "N. Ogoltsoff, Mail Box №***."

Since on his last furlough before the demobilization Red Navy man Ogoltsoff N. M. registered his marriage with Citizen Vakimova G. J., she landed up at the same "mailbox" in the Carpathian mountains.

The "box" was not fixed up with a maternity hospital and for bringing me forth my mother had to visit the town of Nadveerna, thirty kilometers from the regional center, the city of Stanislavl (later renamed into Ivano-Frankivsk after the end-of-the-century Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko).

Going out the "box" gave her the frightful jitters because vehicles on the roads were often shot at by the Bandera men.

> (…for a long time I considered the Bandera men bloody bandits and Nazi accomplices. What else to think of them if a full-scale military division named “Galichina” was manned by Western Ukrainians to fight against the Red Army? Then, gradually, it dawned on me that two years before the German invasion it was the Red Army who occupied Western Ukraine and assisted the Soviet secret police, aka NKVD, in executions and deportation of potential opponents to the Soviet system. Killed just in case, as a preventive measure, in thousands.
>
> Besides, what is a division when compared to an army? Among the German Wehrmacht’s comrades-in-arms, there also was the Russian Liberation Army (RLA) of almost one million servicemen fighting against the USSR.
>
> And last but not least, the rank-and-file Red Army men, participants in the events of that period, let me know that the Bandera men fought fiercely against both Soviet and German troops. They were Carpathian guerrillas defending their land against successive liberators, aka enslavers.
>
> Still, my parents all their life long considered the Bandera men savage bandits…)

And even two years later, when my mother again was in need of the help by maternity hospital, the dogged machine-gun rounds still rumbled on the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, but she could not hear them anymore because her husband had been transferred from one “mailbox” to another and left the Transcarpathia for the Valdai Upland…

The change in the life circumstances of my parents resulted from a snitch-on letter sent to the Special Division of the previous “mailbox” from Konotop. It was composed by the people living in the same house with Galina Vakimova before her marriage.

The house (in Konotop parlance “khutta”) of 12 by 12 meters was a divided property, half of which belonged to citizen Ignat Pilluta. The other half was equally divided between citizen Katerinna Vakimova with her children and citizens Duzenko with their daughter, so each of the two mentioned families owned an entrance hall, a kitchen, and a room.

The daughter of citizens Duzenko married citizen Starikov who moved into her father’s part of the *khutta*. Seems, one kitchen and one room were not enough for all: both the young family and the in-laws. In order to increase their living space, Duzenko and Starikov learned the number of the mailbox where the demobilized Mariner took their former neighbor to and they composed their snitch-on letter for the *box’s* Special Division, whose foremost duty was catching spies, to inform SD that the father of Galina Vakimova (presently Ogoltsova) was arrested by the NKVD as people’s enemy but just before the war he somehow managed to return to Ukraine. Besides, during the years of German occupation, his house served the headquarters of the German troops. (Which was true in part, a Wehrmacht company headquarters was stationed in the Pilluta’s half

of the khutta.) And with the approach of the Soviet Army, Joseph Vakimov fled together with the retreating fascists.

Special Divisions at "mailboxes" were notoriously vigilant and merciless, so the relatives of Joseph, who disappeared in so treacherous anti-Soviet way, would certainly be arrested and—the informers were quite sure—at least, deported. Too bad, in their logical calculations or, sooner, aping a commonplace trick of the period, they neglected the time factor. By that moment Great Leader and Teacher of Peoples, Comrade Stalin, rested in peace already. The nuts tightened under his rule to the utmost started to gradually let up.

Of course, Nikolai Ogoltsoff was repeatedly called and questioned in SD of the "mailbox". There took place an exchange of official correspondence between the *box's* Special Division and the Division of Interior Affairs of the city of Konotop. However, my father was not repressed thanks to his absolutely peasant origin, as well as to the fact that diesel engines generating electricity in "mailboxes" obeyed him so willingly. Still and all, there was no way to simply blink at the informants' "signal" and, just in case, they transferred my father to another "mailbox", located far from borders with foreign countries…

The second lying-in of Galina Ogoltsova occurred again outside the new "box", in the nearest, not secret district center.

> (…it seems that the maternity hospital or, rather, its absence was the Achilles' heel of the then "mailboxes"…)

On arrival to the maternity hospital out there, she was denied admittance because they took her for a Gypsy on account of her black hair and the dressing gown of large printed flowers. Suspiciously flashy, too red. Yet escorting her her husband emphatically condemned so erroneous assumption, his zealous attestation brought about change in the attitude of the segregationist nurses and they let her in for the labors at hand. An hour and a half later my father was told that his wife had born a girl, and five minutes later they heralded arrival of a boy baby. The news triggered a blissful yell by our father, "Switch off the lamp in the deliv'ry room! It's to the light them babies scramble!."

~ ~ ~

History, be it of a private person, or a developed nation, boils down to just two parts of which the first comes history immemorial, presented in loose legends, hazy myths, and dubious traditions; the latter, on the contrary, embraces stark facts caught, tagged, logged, and anchored to a certain calendar, preserved in the public chronicles of some kind, or in the personal memory, in case of a separate individual…

All the children of my parents were fascinated when Mom and Dad got into the mood for sharing the family lore about the deeds and adventures of the eager listeners at the times beyond their infant memories.

About how the first-born started toddling, for example, at the railway station on departure from the Carpathians to the Valdai. At the following train stops my father took me out onto the station platforms to consolidate my skills in feeble walking because the wobbly floor of the rolling car did not favor such hoopla…

At the new place, the family was allocated a timber house where they let me go for independent walks in the yard bounded by a fence of slender planks. My mother was greatly perplexed at my looks, mired as a piglet, on my returns from the yard. Where could I possibly find any dirt in so tiny and orderly corral? Changing me into clean once again, she asked my father to crack the enigma. So what he sees keeping the door open for a tiny crack to peek after the mud-lover? No idle roaming nor hesitation, the kid at once takes a beeline route to the fence plank in the corner fixed by just one—upper—nail, pushes the deal aside and off he goes! In the street, the boy busily scrambles atop the hillock of sand dumped for the construction of another house. Up there he plops on his tummy and slides down the sand slant drenched by the recent rains. A merry-go-happy laughter joins the ride. Could you manage washing things for that cheeky villain?.

While my mother was changing me over again, my father took a hammer, stepped out and nailed the dangling plank in place. Then he came back and together with my mother watched: now what?

The kid walked to the usual place and pushed the plank. It didn't stir. Neither did the planks on both sides from it. The railed in child went along the fence, twice, checking each of the planks then he stood still and burst into tears…. My memory retained neither timber house nor its yard, but at this point in the parents' narration, I felt the emphatic tears welling up in my eyes. *Oboy*, poor captive!.

And from another legend, the paw of horror ran up my bristled hair before to pierce the back of my neck by the grasp of its point-sharp talons because my mother grew suddenly anxious that I was nowhere around and for quite a stretch too, so she sent my father to look for me. He went into the yard then in the street—not a sight of me anywhere and no neighbor had seen me at all but it was getting dark already.

Dad walked the street again, from one end to the other, and then he paid attention to the rumbling noise of the river. He hurried to the steep, almost vertical, slope under which the river, swollen after the rains, rolled angrily on. And there, far down, he made out his son. Run, Daddy, run!.

The torrent of muddy water had engulfed the narrow strip of the bank under the cliff-like drop-off. He had to race knee-deep in the water.

The boy in a tight clench to the wall of clay, a tuft of withered grass in his pinch, his feet under the rushing torrent. He does not even cry already and only whimpers, "uhu-uhu.."

Dad wrapped him in his jacket and hardly managed to find a spot he could climb out without helping himself with his both hands…

And how proudly fluttered the wings of my nose at the story that it was me christened my brother and sister!

Since I was named after my father's brother, the names of my mother's siblings were readied for the twins that came next. In the maternity hospital, they were addressed just so—Vadik and Lyoudochka. However, when the babies were brought home and the parents asked me what we would call them, my immediate response was, "Sassa-'n'-Tattassa." And no fast-talk could convince me to change my mind.

That's how my brother became "Alexander" and my sister was called "Natalia".

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~ ~ ~ The Childhood

The very first notch to sum up my legendary past and start recording in my memory my life events by means of my personal recollections was scratched by the raw morning sun whose glare made me squint and turn my face sideways atop a small grassy mound upon which Mom had pulled me. There we stood, hand in hand, giving way to a black crowd of men marching across our route to kindergarten.

From their advancing mass, they saluted me with cheerful 'hellos'. My hand raised up didn't wave back grasped by Mom's palm, still I felt big, pleased, and proud that my name's so popular among the adult convict-*zeks*. I never realized then that the amiable attention of *zeks* on their march sprung from the presence of so young and good-looking mother…

Those *zeks* were constructing 2 blocks of two-story buildings upon the Gorka upland and after the first block was accomplished, our large family moved into a two-room flat in the uppermost, second, floor in a house of eight-apartments.

All in all, our Block comprised six two-story houses alongside the perimeter of a vast rectangular courtyard. All of the six houses were entered from the courtyard, four longer cranked buildings bounded its corners and had three entrances each, while each of the 2 shorter houses, inserted in 2 opposite sides, had only one. However, it was the presence of those shorties that made rectangular of a mere square. The road of hard concrete ran around Block and its twin under construction both uniting and separating them like loops in 8 or, maybe, ∞.

Allowed to play out, I often left the empty childless Courtyard and crossed the road to get to the block under construction. *Zeks* working there never discouraged my visiting the site and at the midday breaks they treated me to their *balanda* soup. The speedy buildup of a stock of expressive embellishments to my—otherwise babyish—talk soon made my parents aware of who were my current gossip milieu and they posthaste entered me to kindergarten.

The Gorka upland, most elevated part in the Object, shared its name to the two blocks atop of it. On all the four across the loop road around the blocks there grew the forest but no tree could ever
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make it over the concrete in the roadway… When the second of the Gorka blocks was completed, *zeks* disappeared altogether and all the subsequent construction works at the Object (people around preferred this name to "Mailbox") were performed by soldiers with black shoulder straps in their uniform, blackstrappers. Apart from them, there also were redstrapper soldiers at the Object but as for their mission there I am not sure up to now…

~ ~ ~

The trail to kindergarten started right behind our house. There was a long straight dirt road tilt towards the gate in the barber wire fence surrounding the Recruit Depot Barracks. Yet before you reached it, a well-trodden path forked off into the Pine forest on the right. Bypassing the fenced barracks and a large black pond under big trees, the path went down thru the thicket of young Fir-trees. The descent ended at a wide clearing midst the forest enclosed by the openwork timber fence to keep the trees away from the two-story building, the hub to the web of narrow walks to separate playgrounds with sandboxes, small teremok-huts constructed of lining boards, see-saws and even a real bus, short but big-nosed. It had no wheels, to make it easy to step inside directly from the ground, but the steering wheel and the seats were all in place.

Coming to the kindergarten, you had to take off your coat and shoes, leave them in your narrow tall locker marked by the picture of two merry cherries on the door and, after changing into slippers, you might climb the stairs to the second floor with 3 big rooms for separate groups and the common, even bigger, dining room.

My kindergarten life was a patchwork of various feelings and sensations. The victorious pride in the noisy locker-room where parents already started to pop up after their children and where, prompted by Mom, I discovered my ability to tie the shoelaces myself, without anyone's help... The bitter humiliation of defeat from those same shoelaces on that morning when they were drenched, pulled, and made into tight knots and my Mom had to untangle them, distressed that she would be late for her work…

In kindergarten, you never know what awaits you there before Mom or, sometimes, Dad or a neighbor woman will come to take you home… Because while you are there they can catch you unawares and insert a chrome tube-end of a thin rubber hose deep into your nostril and blow in a powder of nasty scratchy smack, or else make you drink a whole tablespoon of pesky fish oil, "Come on! It's so good for health!"

The most horrible thing when they announce that it is the injection day today. The children will line up towards the table with a loudly clinking steely box on it from where the nurse takes out replaceable needles for her syringe. The closer to the table the tighter the grip of horror. You envy those lucky ones for whom the procedure is already over and they go away from the table pressing a piece of cotton wool to their forearm and boast happily it didn't hurt. No, not a tad bit!. The children in the line around whisper how good it is that today's injection is not done under the shoulder blade. That's the most fearful one…

Saturdays are the best. Besides the usual dinner of hateful bean soup, they give you almost half-glass of sour cream sprinkled with sugar around a teaspoon stuck in. And they do not send

children to bed for the “quiet hour”. Instead, the dining room windows are sealed by dark blankets to show filmstrips on the wall. The caretaker reads the white lines of inscription beneath each frame and asks if everyone has reviewed everything in the picture, and only then she drags the next frame in where Zhelezniak the Seaman will capture the iron-clad train of the Whites or a rusty nail will become a brand new one after his visit to the steel furnace, depending on which of the filmstrips the projector was loaded with.

Those Saturday happenings fascinated me—a voice sounding from the darkness, the ladder of thin rays thru the slits in the projector’s tin side, the pictures slowly changing each other on the wall—all brought about a touch of some mysterious secrecy…

I sooner liked kindergarten than otherwise, even though it had certain reefs lying hidden in wait for me to run into. One of such skulkers tripped me up after Dad repaired an alarm clock at home and, handing it back to Mom, announced, “Here you are!. You owe me a bottle now.” Which words, for some reason, delighted me so dearly that I boasted of them in front of children in my kindergarten group which braggadocio was reported by the caretaker to my Mom when she came to take my home in the evening.

On our way home, Mom said I did a shameful thing because a boy should not share outside home everything that goes on among the family. Now, they might think that my Dad was an alcoholic. Was it what I wish? Eh? Was that so very nice? How I hated myself at that moment!.

And in kindergarten it was that, for the first time in my life, I fell in love. However, I did my level best to fight the feeling back. With bitter sadness, I grasped how useless was that love because of the insurmountable—like a bottomless abyss—difference in age between me and the swarthy girl with dark eyes of cherry-berry gleam in them. She was two years younger…

But how unreachable and adult looked the former kindergarten girls who came on a visit there after their first day at school. Clad in festive white aprons, putting on so reserved and mannerly airs, they scarcely deigned to answer the eager questions asked by our group’s caretaker.

The caretakers and other workers at the kindergarten wore white robes, however, not always all of them. Anyway, not the one seated outdoors on a bench next to me allaying my distress. It’s hard to say what exactly it was – a fresh scratch on my knee or a new bump on my forehead, yet as for her name, it was positively Zeena... Her gentle palm was petting my head, and I forgot to cry with my cheek and temple pressed to her left breast. The other cheek and closed eyelids felt the warmth of the sun, I listened to the thuds of her heart beneath the green dress that smelt of summer until there came a shrill call from the building, “Zeena!.”

And at home, we had Grandmother who came from Ryazan because Mom started going to work and there should be someone to look after Sasha and Natasha besides other house-keeping chores. Grandma Martha wore a cotton blouse over a straight skirt nearly reaching the floor and a white blue-dotted kerchief on her head whose large square she folded diagonally to form a big triangle and cover her hair tying the acute angles of the cloth in a loose knot under her round chin…

Mom worked three shifts doing the job of a Watcher at the Pumping Station. And Dad had as many shifts at the Diesel Station. I never learned the location of his workplace but it surely was somewhere in the forest because one day Dad brought a piece of bread wrapped in a newspaper which parcel was given him by a bunny on his way home. “Now, I go home after the shift when – lo! – there's a bunny under a tree, who says, “Here you are, take it to Sehryozha, and Sasha, and Natasha.” The bread from bunny was much more delicious than the bread which Mom sliced for the dinner…

At times the parents’ shifts did not coincide so that one of them was home while the other at work. At one such time, Dad brought me to Mom’s workplace – a squat brick building with a dark green door behind which, just opposite the entrance, there was a small room with a small window high above a big old desk and 2 chairs. But if, bypassing that room, you turned to the left thru a brown door, there would be a huge murky hall full of incessant rumble and with another desk at which Mom sat doing her job.

She didn’t expect us and was so very much surprised. Then she showed me the log under the lamp on her desk because it was her job to enter the time and copy figures from the round manometers’ faces to which there led narrow bridges of iron-sheets all rigged up with handrails because under them everywhere was dark water for the pumps to pump. And it was those pumps to make that terrible noise all the time so that for talking we had to shout loud but even then not all the words were heard, “What!? What!?”

So, we returned to the room by the entrance where Mom took from a drawer in the desk a pencil and some throwaway log with missing pages for me to do some hazy-mazy drawings. I began to draw and was busy but they also stopped talking and only looked at each other though the noise remained back behind the wall. When I finished a big sun, she asked if I wanted to go and play in the yard. I did not want to go out, but then Dad said if I didn’t listen to Mom he never-never would bring me there again anymore, and I went out.

The yard was just the piece of a grass-grown pebble road from the gate to the log shed a bit off the right corner of the Pumping Station. And behind the Station building, there rose a sheer steep overgrown with nettles. I returned to the green door from which a short concrete walk led to the white-washed cube of a small hut without any window and a padlock on the black iron door. Now, what could you play here really indeed?

Two rounded knolls bulged high on either side of the hut, twice taller than it. Grabbing at the long tufts of grass, I climbed the right one. From its height, both roofs, of the hut and Pumping Station, were seen in full but so what? In the opposite direction, beyond the wire fence at the knoll’s foot, there stretched a strip of bush and ran a river sparkling brightly, but I would certainly get punished if I went out of the gate.

For any further playing at all, there remained only the other knoll with a thin tree on its top. I went down to the hut, bypassed it from behind and climbed the second knoll. From up there, everything looked quite the same as from the previous knoll top, only that there you could touch the tree. Hot and sweaty after the climbing, I lay down under it.

What’s that?!. Something stung me at the thigh and then at the other, and then over and over again. I turned around and peeked over my shoulder behind my back. A swarm of red ants was busily bustling about my legs below the shorts of yellow corduroy. I smacked them away but the scorching merciless stings kept increasing in numbers…

Mom jumped out from behind the green door to my wailing, and Dad after her too. He ran up to me and carried me down on his hands. The ants were brushed off, but the swollen, reddened thighs still burned unbearably... And that served me a lesson for the rest of my life – there is no better remedy for the bites of those red beasts than being seated into the sling of the cool green silk in the hem of Mom’s dress stretched taut between her knees.

~ ~ ~

Grandma Martha lived in the same room with us, her three grandchildren, her narrow iron bed stood in the corner to the right from the door, opposite the cumbersome structure of a mighty sofa having upright leatherette back in the frame of varnished wood. The tube-like puffy armrests on the sides of the wide leatherette seat were hinged to let them drop off and get leveled with the seat making it long enough for accommodation of a medium-size basketball player, which was not needed because the twins were bedded in the sofa for the night. At the bottom of the top plank in the back’s frame, there ran a narrow shelf alongside the low strip of mirror inserted above it to reflect the small figurines of white elephant parade lined in a file on the shelf, from the tallest leader to the bantam baby. The elephants had long since lost and the varnished shelf remained empty, except for when we were playing Train constructed of legs-up stools brought from the kitchen and chairs tumbled on their backs, and with the nightfall in the train car, I climbed onto the shelf although its narrowness allowed for stretching on only one your side and to change position you had to go down onto the seat and climb back accordingly.

The Train game became more interesting when Lyda and Yura Zimins, the children of our neighbors, crossed the landing to join us in our room. Then Train became even longer and, sitting inside the up-legged stool-cars, we swayed them with all might and main, so that they tap-tapped against the floor, evoking Grandma’s grumpy orders to stop raging like zealots.

When the games and supper were over, my aluminum folding bed was set up in the center of the room. Mom brought and spread the mattress over it, and a blue oilcloth too, under the sheet, in case I peed in sleep, then a huge pillow, and the thick wool-filled blanket to complete my bed. Grandma Martha turned off the radio box hanging on the left wall by the door and clicked the light switcher. However, the darkness in the room was quite relative – the lights from the windows in the neighboring corner building and from the lampposts in the Courtyard penetrated the tulle mesh of window curtains, and from under the door, there sneaked in a sliver of light from the corridor between the kitchen and the parents’ bedroom.

I watched the dark silhouette of Grandma Martha as she stood by her bed and whispered something up to the ceiling corner above her head. That strange behavior didn’t bother me in the least after Mom's' explanation that it was Grandma Martha’s way of praying to God and that the parents could not allow her to hang an icon in that corner because our Dad was a Party member…

The hardest part of the morning was discovering my stockings. Believe it or not, but even boys in those days wore stockings. Over the underpants, there was donned a special suspender belt with 2 two short rubber straps buttoned on its front. Each strap had a clip-fastener on its hanging end, some gizmo of a rubber nipple squeezed thru a tight-fitting wireframe. You raised the frame to pull a pinch of the stocking top over the nipple which then was forced back into the tight loophole of the wireframe – clip!. Ugh!.

All that harness, of course, was put on me by Mom, however, locating the stockings was my responsibility, and they somehow managed to always find a new place for hiding. Mom would keep urging from the kitchen to come for breakfast, "Can you dress quicker, slow duck?!" Because she, after all, had to be in time for her work, while those meanies were nowhere to dig up… At last – peekaboo! – I spotted the nose of one of them sticking from under the hinged armrest of the sofa with the still sleeping twins. Of course, it called for Mom's help to pull them out and not to waken Sasha up…

Weary of regular morning earfuls, I found an elegant solution to the problem of disappearing stockings and, with the light in the room switched off already but Grandma Martha still gossiping in whisper with her God, I tied them around my ankles, in secret, separately, one for each. My sister-'n'-brother with their pillows on the opposite armrests of the big sofa were, as always, kicking each other under their common blanket and could not follow my subtle manipulations in the dark. And I was in time to cover my legs when Mom entered our room to kiss her children goodnight. Yet, quite unexpectedly she did something never done before. Mom switched on the light, who lived under the ceiling within the bulb surrounded by the orange shade of silk, lush fringes hanging from the rim let him sleep comfortably in daytime. But now he had to spring at once from his bed and show—as she threw the blanket off my legs—the stocking shackles on each of my ankles. "Something had just pulled me to do it", she told Dad later with a laugh. I had to untie the stockings and leave them atop the bundle of my other clothes on the chair next to my folding bed and never realize so a brilliant solution…

~ ~ ~

In all fairness, the most unpleasant part in my kindergarten life was going to bed after the midday meal for the "quiet hour". You had to take off your clothes and put them on a small white stool and, no matter how carefully you did it, at getting up after the "quiet hour" the clothes would be in full mess, and the stocking fastener in one or another garter would stubbornly refuse to do its job.

Besides, what's the use of idle lying for a whole hour staring at the white ceiling or the white window curtains, or along the long row of cots with a narrow passage after each pair of them? The children would lie silently in that row ending by the far off white wall with the far-off-white-robed caretaker in her chair reading silently her book, distracted at times by some or other child who would approach her to ask in whisper for permission to go out to the toilet. And, after her whispered permit, she would in a low voice silence the rustle of whispering arising along the row of cots, "Now, everyone shuts their eyes and sleep!" Maybe, now and then I did fall asleep at some "quiet hours", though more often it was kinda still stupor with my eyes open but not seeing the white ceiling from the white sheet drawn over my head…

And suddenly the drowsiness was cast away by a gentle touch of cautious fingers creeping from my knee up over the thigh. I looked out from under the sheet. Irochka Likhachova was lying on the next cot with her eyes closed tightly but, in between the sheets over our cots, I could clearly make out a length of her outstretched arm. The quiet fingers dived into my underpants to enclose my flesh in a warm soft palm. It felt unspeakably pleasant. But then her touch moved away from my private parts – why? yet more!

Her hand found mine and pulled it under her sheet to put my palm on something soft and yielding that had no name, which it did not need at all because all I needed was that all that just went on and on. However, when I, with my eyes tightly closed, once again brought her hand back under my sheet, she stayed there all too briefly before pulling mine over to hers... At that moment the caretaker announced the end of "quiet hour" and called all to get up. The room filled with the hubbub of dressing children.

"And we don't forget to make our beds," the caretaker repeated instructively, walking to and fro along the runner by the row of cots, when all of a sudden Irochka Likhachova shouted, "And Ogoltsoff sneaked into my panties!"

The children lulled in expectation. Sledgehammered with the disgraceful truth, I feel a hot wave of shame rolling up to spill in tears out of my eyes. They mingle with my roar, "It's you who sneaked! Fool!", and I and run out of the room to the second-floor landing tiled with alternating squares of yellow and brown.

Stopping there, I decide to never ever any more return to that group and that kindergarten. No, never ever anymore. That is enough of enoughs. But I don't have time to think about how I will live further on because I get spellbound by the red fire extinguisher on the wall.

In fact, it was not the whole fire extinguisher that mesmerized me but the yellow square on its side framing the picture where a man in a cap on his head held exactly the same fire extinguisher only in action already, upside down, to spurt the widening gush towards a fat bush of flames.

The picture was intended, probably, to serve a kind of visual instruction on how to use this or any other fire extinguisher, for which reason the one in the man's hands was painted true to life in every detail. Even the yellow square with the instructive picture on its side was scrupulously reproduced, portraying a little man in a tiny cap who fought, standing upside down, the undersized fire with the bushy spurt from his miniature fire extinguisher.

Then and there it dawned on me that in the next, already blurred, picture on that miniature extinguisher the already indiscernible man was back again to his normal position, feet down. Yet in the still next, further reduced, picture he would be on his head once more and—the most breathtaking discovery!—these diminishing men just could not end, they would only grow smaller, receding to the state of unimaginably tiny specks and dwindle on without ever ending their dwarfish tumbles, serving each other a link and a spring-board to ever turning tinier simply because of that Fire Extinguisher who started them off from his nail in the wall on the second floor landing next to the white door to the senior group, opposite the door to the toilet.

The spell was shattered to pieces by the awakening calls for me to immediately come to the dining room where the kindergarten groups were seated already for the after-“quiet-hour” tea. Yet ever since, passing below Fire Extinguisher—the bearer of innumerable worlds—I felt respectful understanding. As for sneaking into someone else’s panties, that one became my only and unique experience. And enlightened by it, at all the “quiet hours” that followed, whenever I had to go, by the undertone permission from the caretaker, out to pee then, passing by, I fully knew the meaning of sheets overlapping the gap between a pair of coupled cots, as well as why so firmly kept Khromov his eyes closed in his cot next to the Sontseva’s…

~ ~ ~

We lived on the second floor and our door was followed by that of the Morozovs, pensioner spouses in a three-room apartment. Opposite to them across the landing, there also was an apartment of 3 rooms, yet only 2 of them were dwelt by the Zimins family, while the third one was populated by single women, now and then replacing one another, at times there happened couples of women, who declared themselves relatives after meaningful smiles at each other.

The dead wall between the doors to the Morozovs’ and to the Zimins’ was outfitted with a vertical iron ladder reaching the ever open hatchway to the attic where the tenants hung their washing under the slate roof, and the father in the Savkins family—whose apartment was smack-bang opposite ours—kept pigeons after he came home and changed into his blue sportswear.

The wooden handrail supported by the iron uprights ran from the Savkins’ door towards ours without crossing the whole landing though, because it turned down to follow the two flights of steps to the first-floor landing and from there four more steps down—to the staircase-entrance vestibule. There you pushed the wide entrance door held closed by a rusty iron spring, big and screechy, and went into the wide expanse of our block Courtyard, leaving behind the vestibule with one more, narrow, door that hid the steep steps into the impenetrable darkness of underground basement.

Deducing from my subsequent life experience, I may safely assume that we lived in Flat 5 though at that time I didn’t know it yet. All I knew was that the most numerous population in a house were its doors. Behind the first door with a large handmade mailbox screwed up to it, there would open the hallway with the narrow door of the tiny storeroom to the right, and the partly glazed door to the parents’ room on the left, where instead of a window was the wide balcony door, also glazed in its upper part, viewing the Courtyard.

Straight ahead from the hallway started the long corridor to the kitchen, past two blind doors on the right, the first, to the bathroom, followed by the toilet door, while in the left wall immediately before the kitchen, there was just one, also blind, door to the children’s room that had two windows, one of which faced the Courtyard and the other presented the view of murky windows in the plastered butt wall of the next, corner, house in the Block. The only window in the kitchen was looking at the same wall in the adjacent corner building, and to the right from the kitchen door, up under the ceiling, the matte glassed square of the quite small toilet window was also filled with the same murky darkness unless the lamp there was on. Neither bathroom nor the storeroom closeted behind its white door in the hallway had any windows at all but, in the ceiling

of each of them, there hung an electric bulb—just click the black nose jutting from the round switch by the needed door, and step inside without angst because, as it turned out, all the doors in a house opened inside the rooms they serve…

Entering the toilet, first of anything else I spat on the wall to the left from the throne and only then sat down to go potty and watch the slow progress of spittle crawling down the green coat of paint, very vertically, leaving a moist trail in its wake. If the glob of the snailing saliva lacked sufficient reserves to reach the baseboard, I would assist it by an additional spit in the track, just above the stuck locomotive. At times the trip took from three to four spits and some other times the initial one was enough.

The parents were lost in perplexity as regards the spittle condensing under the toilet wall until the day when Dad entered immediately after me, and at the strict interrogation that followed I admitted doing that yet failed to offer any explanation why. Since then, fearful of punishment, I blotted the traces of the wrong-doing with the pieces of cut-up newspapers from the cloth bag on the opposite wall but the thrill was gone.

> (…my son Ahshaut at the age of five sometimes peed past the john, on the toilet wall. More than once I carefully explained him that it was not the right way of taking a leak, and those who missed the target should wipe up after themselves.
>
> One day he balked and refused to wipe the puddle. Then I grabbed at his ear, led him to the bathroom, and ordered to pick up the floor cloth, then brought him back to the toilet where, in a rage-choked voice, ordered to collect all the urine from the floor with that cloth. He obeyed.
>
> Of course, in more developed states my parental rights would be grossly jeopardized after the child abuse of so violent a nature, still and all, I consider myself right at that particular development because no biological species can ever survive in their own waste... I would savvy, were the kid just spitting on the wall, however, in the house that I built the toilet walls were simply plastered and whitewashed, no spittle would crawl down such a surface. Later, the money for ceramic wall tiles got scraped up too, yet by that time the children were already adults…)

You feel yourself kinda Almighty when reconstructing the world of a half-century ago, adjusting the details to your liking with no one to rub your nose in it even if you muck up.

However, you can fool anyone but yourself, and I am ready to admit that now, from the distance in fifty years, not everything is falling in just nicely. For instance, I am far from certain that the pigeon enclosure in the attic had anything to do with Captain Savkin. The mentioned structure could as easily belong to Stepan Zimin, the father of Lyda and Yura... Or maybe there were two enclosures?

Frankly, at the moment I am not sure about the presence of pigeons in one or the other enclosure (but were there two of them?) on the day when I ventured to climb up the iron ladder towards something unknown, indistinguishable in the murky square hole of the hatchway above my head.

And it is pretty possible that I simply remembered the remark overheard in my parents' chat, that Stepan's pigeons also fell victim to his unrestrained booze binges.

On the whole, just one thing stands beyond the shadow of a doubt – the tremulous ecstasy on the doorsill to revelation when, leaving behind my sister's dismal divination of the pending manslaughter of me by the fatherly hand and, next to her, the silent stare of my brother watching closely each my movement from the landing down there, which diminished at each ladder rung as I climbed into the brave new world that any moment now would unfurl before me beneath the grayish underbelly of the slate roof… A few days later Natasha came running into our room to proudly herald that Sasha had just climbed up to the attic too.

Taking into account all of that, it is quite probable that the pigeons were gone from the attic enclosure, but in the Courtyard, there were hosts of them…

The Courtyard's layout presented a systematized masterpiece of pure unalloyed geometricity. Inside the big rectangular formed by the 6 two-storied buildings, the ellipse of the road was inscribed and accentuated by the knee-deep drenches along its both sides, bridged by albeit short, yet mighty overpasses minutely opposite each of the 14 entrances to the 6 houses in our Block.

Two narrow concrete walks aligned at right angles to the ellipse's longitudinal axis cut it into three even chunks, the resultant rectangular in between the walks and the road ditches was further divided into three equal segments by one more couple of concrete walks parallel to the above-mentioned axis to connect the walks also mentioned already.

The intersection points formed four corners of the central segment, from which the rays of 4 additional concrete walks traversed the Courtyard diagonally, each one projected in the direction of the central entrances to the respective corner buildings, the line between adjacent ray-starting points served the chord of a concrete arc-walk described about a round lumber gazebo, 2 of them all in all, so that, on the whole, it presented the model of perfection reminiscent of the Versailles' design, only of concrete.

> (…it is impossible to come across such a purified Bau Stile in nature. No circular circles exist among natural ones, neither absolutely isosceles triangles, nor flawless squares – someplace, somehow, the accomplished evenness would be inevitably ruined by the stubborn awl spiking thru the Mother Nature's haversack…)

Of course, there were no fancy waterworks in our Courtyard, neither trees nor bushes. Maybe, later they planted something there yet, in my memory, I can find not even a seedling but only grass cut into geometric figures by the walks of concrete and loose pigeon flocks flying from one end of the vast Courtyard to the other when there sounded "…gooil-gooil-gooil-gooil-gooil-gooil-gooil!." call.

I liked those looking so alike, yet somehow different, birds flocking around you to bang the scattered bread crumbles away from the road on which you'd never see a vehicle except for a slow-go truck carrying, once in a blue moon, the furniture of tenants moving in or out, or a load of firewood for Titan boilers installed in the apartments' bathrooms.

But even more, I liked feeding pigeons on the tin ledge out the kitchen window. Although it took a long wait before some of the birds would get it where your “gooil-gooil” invitation was coming from and hover with the swish of air-cutting wings in the relentless flapping above the ledge covered by the thick spill of breadcrumbs before landing on it with their raw legs to start the quick tap-tapping at the offer on the hollow-sounding tin.

The pigeons seemed to have an eye on each other or, probably, they had some kind of intercom system because the first bird was very soon followed by others flying in, in twos and threes, and whole flocks, maybe even from the other block. The window ledge submerged into the multi-layer whirlpool of feathered backs and heads ducking to pick the crumbs, pushing each other, fluttering off the edge and squeezing in back again. Then, taking advantage of that pandemonium, you could cautiously put your hand out thru the square leaf up in the kitchen window and touch from above one of their moving backs, but tenderly, so that they wouldn’t dash off with the loud flaps of the wings and flush away all at once…

~ ~ ~

Besides the pigeons, I also liked holidays, especially the New Year. The Christmas tree was set up in the parents’ room in front of the white tulle curtain screening the cold balcony door. The plywood boxes from postal parcels received long ago and presently full of fragile sparkling adoration came from the narrow storeroom: all kinds of fruits, dwarfs, bells, grandfathers frosts, baskets, drill-bit-like purple icicles, balls with inlaid snowflakes on their opposite sides and just balls but also beautiful, stars framed within thin glass tubes, fluffy rain-garlands of golden foil. In addition, we made paper garland-chains as taught by Mom. With different watercolors we painted the paper, it dried overnight and was cut into finger-wide colored strips which we glued with wheatpaste into lots of multicolored links in the growing catenas of our homemade garlands.

Lastly, after decorating the tree with toys and sweetmeat—because a candy with a thread thru its bright wrapper is both nice and eatable decoration which you can cut off and enjoy at Xmas tide—a snowdrift of white cotton wool was put under the tree over the plywood footing of one-foot-tall Grandfather Frost in his red broadcloth coat, one of his mitten-clad hands in firm clasp at his tall staff and the other clutching the mouth of the sack over his shoulder tied with a red ribbon which hid the seam too sturdy to allow actual investigation of the bumps bulging from inside through the sackcloth.

Oh! How could I forget the multicolored twinkling of tiny bulbs from their long thin wires?!. They came into the Christmas tree before anything else, and those wires were connected to the heavy electric transformer also hidden under the wool snowdrifts, Dad made it himself. And the mask of Bear for the matinée in kindergarten was also his production. Mom explained him how to do it and Dad brought some special clay from his work and then on a sheet of plywood he modeled the bear’s face with its stuck-up nose. When the clay got stone-hard, Dad and Mom covered it with layers of gauze and water-soaked shreds of newspaper. It took two days for the muzzle to dry and harden, then the clay was thrown away and—wow!—there was a mask made of papier-mâché. The mask was colored with brown watercolor, and Mom sewed the Bear costume of brown satin, it was a one-piece affair so you could get into the trousers only thru the

jacket. That's why at the matinée I did not envy the woodcutters with the cardboard axes over their shoulders.

> (…and until now the watercolors smell to me of the New Year, or maybe vice verse, it's hard to decide, I'm not too good at moot points…)

If the big bed in the parents' room was taken apart and brought to our room, it meant that later in the evening they would haul tables from the neighboring apartments and set them in the freed bedroom for guests to sit around. The neighbors' children would gather in our room to play.

When it got very late and all the visiting children gone back to their apartments, I would venture to the parents' room filled with the smarting mist of thinly bluish tobacco smoke and the noise of loud voices each of which trying to speak louder than anyone's else. Old Morozov would announce that being a young man he once oared no less than 17 kilometers to a date, and the man by his side would eagerly confirm that proves it was worth it and all the people would rejoice at the good news and laugh happily and they would grab each other and start dancing and fill all of the room with their giant figures, up to the ceiling, and circle along with the disc on the gramophone brought by someone of the guests.

Then they again would just speak but not listen who says what, and Mom, sitting at the table, would start singing about the lights on the streets of the Saratov City full of unmarried young men, and her eyelids would drop and shut half of her eyes. Mortified by shame at that view, I would get onto her lap and say, "Mom, don't sing, please, don't!" And she would laugh, and push the glass back, and say she did not drink anymore and go on singing all the same. In the end the guests would go to their apartments taking out the tables with them and still talking without listening. I would be sent to our room where Sasha already sleeps on the big sofa but Natasha alertly bobbing from her pillow. In the kitchen, there would sound the tinkle of the dishes being washed by Grandma and Mom, and then the light in our room would be briefly turned on for the parent bed parts to be taken back…

Besides her work, Mom was also taking part in the Artistic Amateur Activities at the House of Officers which was very far to go and I knew it because at times the parents took me to the cinema there and made the twins envy so dearly. All the movies started by loud music and the big round clock on the Kremlin tower opening a newer newsreel "The News of the Day" about black-faced miners in helmets walking from their mines, and lonely weaver-women in white head-clothes pacing along the rows of shaking machine tools, and giant halls full of bareheaded clapping people. But then one of the news frightened me to tears when showed jerky bulldozers in fascist concentration camps whose blades were pushing heaps of naked corpses to fill deep trenches and press them down by their caterpillar tracks. Mom told me to shut my eyes and not watch and, after that, they didn't take me to the cinema anymore.

However, when the Artistic Amateur Activities performed in their concert at the House of Officers, Dad took me along. Different people from Artistic Amateur Activities came on stage to sing by the accompaniment of one and the same button accordion and the audience clapped so loudly. Then the whole stage was left for just one man who talked for a long time, yet I couldn't get it what about even though he made his voice louder and louder until they started clapping

from all the sides to send him away. And so it went on with singing and talking and clapping in between, but I waited only to see my Mom up there. At last, when a lot of women in the same long skirts came to dance with a lot of men in high boots, Dad said, “Aha! Here is your dear Mommy!” But I could not make her out because the long skirts were all alike and made the women so too similar to each other. Dad had to point again who was my Mom and after that I looked only at her so as not to lose.

If not for that intent attention, I would have, probably, missed the moment which stuck in me for many years like a splinter which you cannot pull out and it’s just better not to press the spot where it sits…The women dancers on the stage were all spinning quicker and quicker and their long skirts also swerved rising to their knees, but my Mom’s skirt splashed suddenly to flash her legs up to the very panties. Unbearable shame flooded me, and for the rest of the concert I kept my head down never looking up from the red-painted boards in the floor beneath my felt boots, no matter how loudly they clapped, and all the long way home I did not want to talk to any of my parents even when asked why I was so pouty.

> (…in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn’t realized yet…)

But, hey! Really, what’s the point in those concerts at all if there was a shiny brown radio box on the wall in our—children’s—room? It could both talk and sing, and play music, we knew it very well that when they broadcast Arkady Raikin you should turn the white knob of the volume control to make it louder, then run and call everyone in the house to haste to our room for laughing all together back to the box on the wall. And we learned to hush the radio or even turn it off when there was a concert for the cello and orchestra, or if someone was telling how good was the news about the victory of Cuban Revolution in Cuba which made him so happy that he turned out 2 daily tasks in just 1 shift for spite of the revenge-seekers and their leader Adenauer…

~ ~ ~

Yet, the May Day celebration was not a home holiday at all.

First, you had to walk a long way by the road going down past the Block’s corner building and there, at the foot of the Gorka upland, to keep walking on and on. Not alone though, there were lots of people going the same way, both adults and children. People greeted each other cheerfully, in their hands they carried bunches of balloons or pliant twigs with handmade leaves of green tissue paper fixed by black threads spun fast and profusely, or long pieces of red cloth with big white letters spanned between 2 poles, and also portraits of different men, both bold and not too much so, set upon stubby separate sticks.

Like almost all the children, I had a short square pennant in my hands, on a thin—like a pencil, only a tad bit longer—rod. In the red pennant, the yellow circle crisscrossed with yellow grid stood for the globe, and a yellow dove soared above it, yet not as high as the capture of yellow letters: “Peace be to the World!” Of course, I couldn’t read at that time but those pennants

remained unchangeable year after year for decades, they abode for latecomers and slow learners as well.

And while we all walked on, in the distance ahead of us, there emerged music. The nearer the louder it sounded and made us walk quicker and drop idle talks, and then we passed by 2 rows of soldier-musicians with shining trumpets and booming drum, and past a tall red balcony with people standing still upon it in their forage caps but, strangely, that balcony had no house behind it…

After one of the May Days, I felt like drawing a holiday so Grandma gave me a sheet of ruled paper and a pencil… In the center of the sheet, I drew a large balloon on a string going down to the bottom edge of the sheet. It looked good, so big and festive. However, I wanted more than that, I wanted the holiday be all over the world and, to the right from the balloon, I drew a stretch of blind wood fencing behind which there lived not ours but Germans and other enemies from the newsreels in the House of Officers, only all of them invisible, of course, because of the fencing.

Okay, Germans, let it be a holiday even for you! And I drew another balloon on the string rising from behind the fence. Lastly, to make it clear who is who and who is celebrating where, I added a fat cross in the enemies' balloon.

The masterpiece accomplished, I briefly admired my work of art and then ran to share it, for a starter, with Grandma… At first, she couldn't figure out what is what, and I had to explain to her the picture. But when I got to the point that let even Germans have a holiday—we are not meanies, right?—she stopped me sharply and vented severe criticism. I should have learned since long, said she, that because of my those cross-adorned balloons the "black raven" vehicle would stop by our house and take my Dad away arrested, and she asked if that was what I wanted.

I felt sorry for Dad and terrified by the prospect to stay without him. Bursting in sobs, I crushed the ill-fated drawing and ran to the bathroom to thrust the crumpled paper ball behind the pig-iron door of the water boiler Titan where they lighted fire when heating water for bathing…

~ ~ ~

The hardest thing in the morning is getting out of bed. It seems you'd give anything at all for another couple of minutes lying undisturbed by their yells it's time to go to kindergarten.

On one of such mornings, the pillow under my head felt softer than a fleecy white cloud in the sky, and in the mattress yielding under me there developed such an exact mold absorbing my body in its gentle embrace that a mere thought of tearing myself away from that pleasure and warmth accumulated overnight under the blanket was simply unthinkable. So I went on lying until there popped up the frightening knowledge – if I would not shed off that blissful boggy drowsiness right away, then never would I come to kindergarten that morning, and never ever come to anywhere else because it would be a languor death in sleep.

Of course, so macabre words were beyond my ken then, I didn't need them though nor other whimsy turns of phrase of that kind because my thoughts were coming mostly in the form of feeling, so I just felt freaked out, got up into the chilly room and started to dress. On Sundays, it was possible to lie as long as you wanted but never again the bed acquired such a pleasing shape…

One Sunday I woke up alone in the room and heard Sasha-'n'-Natasha's merry screams from somewhere outside. I donned and hurried out into the corridor. They were not there nor in the kitchen, where only Grandma was clinking the pots' lids. Aha! In the parents' room! I ran in there at the height of fun – my brother-'n'-sister, and Mom was laughing together at a white shapeless lump standing in the corner on their bare feet. Of course, it's Dad! He's thrown over himself the thick blanket from the parents' bed and now looms there bulkily next to the wardrobe.

And all at once those legs started to jump jointly under the fat fluttering folds. The horrible white bare-legged creature blocked the way towards the corridor herding Mom and all three of us to the balcony door. Oh, how we laughed! And clung to Mom more and more convulsively.

Then one of us began to cry and Mom said, "There-there, this is Dad, silly!" But Sasha did not stop (or, maybe, Natasha but not me though my laughter sounded more and more hysterical) and Mom said, "Well, enough, Kolya!" And the blanket straightened up and fell off revealing laughing face of Dad in his underpants and tank top, and we all together started to comfort Sasha sitting high in Mom's arms and incredulously trying to laugh thru tears.

> (…laughter and fear go hand in hand and there is nothing more frightening than something you can't make out what…)

And on Monday morning I went to the parents' room to admit that at night I again peed in bed. They were already dressed, and Dad said, "Gak! Such a big boy!" And Mom ordered me to peel off my underpants and get into their bed. From a shelf in the wardrobe, she fetched dry underpants for me and followed Dad into the kitchen.

I was lying under the blanket still warm with their warmth. Even the sheet was so soft, caressing. Full of pleasure I stretched out as much as I could, both legs and arms. My right hand got under the pillow and pulled out an ungraspable coarsened rag. I could not guess its purpose in their bed but I felt that I had touched something shameful and shouldn't ask anyone about it…

~ ~ ~

It's hard to say what was more delicious: Mom's pastry or Grandma's buns both baked for holidays in the blue electric oven "Kharkov".

Grandma Martha spent her days in the kitchen cooking and washing up, and in the children's room sitting on her bed not to be in the way of our playing.

In the evenings, she read us *The Russian Epic Tales*, a book about hero warriors who fought countless hordes of invaders or the Dragon Gorynich, and for the rest and recreation after the battles, they visited Prince Vladimir the Red Sun in the city of Kiev. That's when the iron bed had to bear the additional weight of the three of us seated around Grandma Martha to listen about the exploits of Alesha Popovich or Dobrinya Nikitich.

When the heroes had their moments of sadness, they remembered their mothers, each one his own, but to their different, absent, mothers they all addressed one and the same reproach: why those mothers weren't smart enough to wrap the future heroes into a piece of white cloth while they were still just silly babies and drop them into the fast running River-Mommy?

Only Ilya of Murom and Warrior Svyatogor, who grew so mighty that even the Earth Mother could bear him no more and only mountain rocks still somehow withstood his movements, they never raised that mutual lamentation, not even when having the bluest blues…

At times one or another of the hero warriors had a fight with one or another beauty disguised in armor. Those fights ended differently but the defeated would invariably say, "Do not kill me but treat instead to good food and drink and kiss on my mouth as sweet as sugar." With all of those epic tales heard more than once, I knew by heart when such combats with gastronomic outcome were near at hand and eagerly anticipated them in advance...

Grandma Martha named the bathroom "the bathhouse", and after her weekly bath, she was returning to our room steam-heated to red glow and half undressed—in just a tank top for menswear and one of her long skirts. Then she sat down on her iron bed to cool off while combing and braiding her gray hair into a pigtail. On her left forearm, there was a large mole in the form of a female nipple, the so-called "bitch's udder".

In course of one of her after-bath proceedings when she seemed to notice nothing but the curved plastic comb running thru the damp strands of her hair, I took advantage of my brother-'n'-sister's distraction by agitated playing on the big sofa and sneaked under the springy mesh in the Grandma's bed well sagged under her weight. There I cautiously turned over to my back and looked up – under the skirt between her straddled legs wide and firmly planted in the floor. Why? I did not know. Neither was there anything to make out in the dusk within the dark dome of the skirt. And I crawled away, as carefully as I could, feeling belated shame, regret, and a strong suspicion that she was aware of my hushed maneuvers…

Sasha was a reliable younger brother, credulous and taciturn. He was born after the brisk Natasha, and his complexion startled all by purple-blueish tinge because of the umbilical cord had almost strangled him, yet he was born in a shirt, which was taken off him in the maternity hospital and Mom explained later that from newborns' shirts they produced some special medicine.

And Natasha turned out a really shrewd weasel. She was the first to know all the news: that the following day Grandma was to bake buns, that new tenants were to move into the flat on the first floor, that on Saturday the parents would go to a party at some people's place, and that you should never-never kill a frog or it would rain cats and dogs.

At the sides of the back of her head, there started two pigtails split by ribbons before reaching her shoulders to fix each braid with a lovely bow-knot at its end. Yet, neither of those bows survived for long before falling apart into a tight knot with a pair of narrow ribbon tails. Probably, because of zealous spinning her head on all the quarters to find out: what-where-when?.

The two-year difference in age gave me a tangible degree of authority in the eyes of the younger. However, when Sasha taciturnly reran my climbing to the attic, then by that feat he, like, overtook me for two years. Of course, neither he, nor I, nor Natasha was capable at that time to put into words such a finicky deduction. We stayed at the level of emotional sensations expressed by interjections like, “Wow, boy!..” or, “Oh-oh, boy!..”

The unexpressed desire to reinforce my faltering authority and self-esteem or, maybe, some other inexpressible, or already forgotten, reasons led me to being nasty. One evening, with the light in the room already turned off, yet my brother-’n’-sister, laid to sleep with their heads on the opposite armrests in the huge leatherette sofa, still a-giggling and kicking each other under their common blanket because Grandma Martha couldn’t upbraid them while standing by her bed and whispering into the upper corner, I suddenly spoke up from my folding bed, “Tell you what, Grandma? God is a jerk!”

After a moment of complete silence, she erupted in threats of hell and its laborer devils and their pending job to make me lick a red-hot frying pan in future, yet I only laughed in response and, spurred by the reverent lull upon the sofa, showed no esteem for the awaiting tortures, “Whatever! Your God’s a jerk all the same!”

The following morning Grandma Martha did not talk to me. On my return from kindergarten, Natasha briefed me that in the morning, as Dad came home after his night shift, Grandma told him everything and wept in the kitchen and the parents were presently gone to a party at someone’s but I’d be let have it, and that’s for sure!

To all of my goody-goody attempts at starting a dialogue, Grandma Martha kept aloof and silent and soon left for the kitchen… A couple of hours sweating it, then the front door slammed, the parents’ voices sounded in the hallway. They moved to the kitchen where the talk became quicker and hotter. The door in our room prevented making out the subject of the heated discussion.

The voices' volume kept growing steadily on until the door flew open by Dad’s hand. “What? Scoffing at elders, eh? I’ll show you ‘a jerk’!” His hands yanked the narrow black belt from the waist of his pants. A black snake with the square chrome-flashing head flushed up above his head. His arm swayed and a never experienced pain scorched me. Once more. And more.

Wailing and wriggling, I rolled under Grandma’s bed to escape the belt. Dad grabbed the back of the bed and by one mighty jerk threw it over to the middle of the room. The mattress and all dropped down alongside the wall. I scrambled after the bed to shelter beneath the shield of its springy mesh. Dad was yanking the bed back and forth whipping on its both sides but I, with

inexplicable speed, ran on all fours under the mesh jumping overhead, and mingled my howling and wailing, “Daddy! Dear! My! Don’t beat me! I won’t! Never again!” into his, “Snooty snot!”

Mom and Grandma came running from the kitchen. Mom screamed, “Kolya! Don’t!” and stretched out her arm to catch the hissing impact of the belt. Grandma also kvetched loudly, and they took Dad out of the room.

Crestfallen, with shallow whimpers, I rubbed the welts left by the belt looking away from the younger who huddled, in petrified silence, against the back of the big sofa…

~ ~ ~

In the Courtyard, we played *Classlets*.

First, you need a chalk to draw a big rectangular in the concrete walk and split it into five pairs of squares, like, a two-column table of 5 rows. Then get the *bitka*—a can from used shoe polish filled with sand whose enclosed mass conveys your *bitka* the required gravity, turns it a kinda tiny discus.

Now, standing out the bottom line of the first column, you throw your *bitka* into one of 10 *classlet*-squares and then go after it hopping on one leg (up the first column and down the second, 1 leap per square) to pick it up and proceed thru the rest of the table, also in one-legged hops, to leave the table of *classlets* by the final bound from the bottom *classlet* in the second column. A parabola-shaped mission trip is over.

(While going thru the table, take care your sandal never lands near any of the chalked lines or else the other players, closely watching your progress, would raise a hell of jeering shouts insisting that you stomped on it.)

Now, safely out of the *Classlets* table, you have the right to throw your *bitka* targeting the next square in the parabola and repeat your hopping trip to carry it out. After your *bitka* visited, in turn, all of the *classlets*, you mark one of them as your “house” and further on in the game you may feel in it at home—put your other foot down and relax. Yet, if your *bitka* missed the proper square or landed on a line, or if you touched a line when hopping, another player starts their tries and you become a watcher…

There were ball games as well. For instance, hitting a ball non-stop against the ground, you had to accompany each strike with a separate word, “I! – know! – five! – girls’! – names!” At each subsequent hit at the ball, you called out one of 5 random names, no repetitions allowed. Then followed 5 boy’s names, 5 flowers, 5 animals, etc., etc., until the ball bounced out of reach or the player got lost in their enumerations…

Another ball game was not as intellectual. You just hit the ball against the faded-pinkish-washed plaster on the house wall (closer to the corner, safely away from the window on the first floor). Guessing the landing spot of the re-bounced ball, you jumped over it with your legs wide apart before it hit the ground.

The player behind you caught the ball to throw it back against the wall—this time for them to jump for you to catch. There could be more players in the game though, so you had to wait for your turn in the line of jumpers. I was enchanted by the game's infinity. It was like those endless pictures on the red side of Fire Extinguisher…

We played outside the Courtyard as well, across the ever-empty road surrounding the twin blocks.

Atop the tilt towards the Recruit Depot Barracks, a tall board-fencing enclosed large garbage containers for all of our Block. Next to the fence, there stretched a level area grown with green grass except for a lonely sagging pile of sand by the enclosure, probably, a leftover from the construction times and later used like any sand by any children in any sandbox. Apart from all those uses, we played a special sand game though, which had no name.

You just scooped a handful of sand and tossed it up, trying to catch the returning sand into your palm, as much as you could. The catch was held in the outstretched hand and you pronounced the ritual formula, "So much—for Lenin!"

Then the sand in the palm was thrown up again and caught back once again. Over the second catch, the words in the formula changed the proposed addressee, "So much—for Stalin!"

After the third toss, no one cared to catch the sand, on the contrary, they hid their hands behind their backs to avoid the downing sand, and then even clapped to ensure not a random grain had any chance to keep stuck to the palm, "And so much—for Hitler! That's that!"

Somehow, I felt ill at ease about not fully fair play in the game when you leave the last in the trinity without the tiniest speck of sand. And one day playing at the pile alone, I broke the rules and caught a pinch of sand even for Hitler although I knew he was a very bad one and even had a tail before they caught him…

Besides, we used the sprawling sandpile's outskirts for constructing of "secrets"—small holes scooped out no deeper than a teacup—whose bottoms we floored with the heads from the flowers picked in the grass. A shard of pane glass put upon the petals of the heads pressed them down and imparted a look of somewhat melancholic beauty. Then the hole was filled up and leveled and we made arrangements over it "to check our secret" the following day, however, either we forgot or it was raining, and later we could not find "the secret", so just produced another one…

One day the rain caught me in one of the round gazebos in the Courtyard. As a matter of fact, it sooner was crossbred of the outright deluge with a thunderstorm. Black clouds piled up over the entire Courtyard, all around got wrapped in the dark as if sunk a flushing night. The adults and children who happened to be in the gazebo scattered racing along the walks towards their houses. Only I tarried over a forgotten book with the pictures of three hunters roaming thru the mountain woods until the waterfall rushed down from the darkness above. It was unthinkable to run home thru that roaring flood, I had to only wait until it was over.

Thunder pearls erupted madly, the lightning tore the sky over Block crisscross and hither-thither. The gazebo bounced from the deafening rumbling, and the wind-driven sheets of water lashed the inside circle of the cemented floor reaching far over its center. I placed the book on the bench running along the lee side props but some crazy drops got even there. It was so scary and wet, and cold, and never-ending.

When, nonetheless, the storm let up, the clouds of darkness broke asunder revealing the blue of the sky as well as the fact that the day was far from being over yet, and that my sister Natasha was running from our staircase-entrance with the already needless umbrella because Mom sent her to call me home.

“We knew that you were here”, she said panting, “You could be seen at first…”

~ ~ ~

> (...it’s not that I have any special knack for nosing out conspiracies, yet the unyielding confluence of chance circumstances would mulishly bring me smack-bang to the scene of some secret scheme a-brewing…

When in kindergarten three boys of the senior group began to exchange clandestine hints, something like:

“So it's today, eh?”

“We’ll definitely go, yes?”

“After kindergarten’s over, right?”

I felt unbearable bitterness that some adventure was obviously underway while I stayed with the usual same plain everyday. That's why I approached the leader in the gang of 3 and asked him directly, “Where are you going to?”

“To steal tomatoes in the Where-Where Mountains.”

“May I go with you?”

“Okay.”

I had already a vague idea that stealing was bad but in my whole life I hadn’t seen yet any mountains, only the low hillock of the overgrown with Fir-trees Bugorok-Knoll whose sandy drop-off side was facing the grassy level grounds by the garbage bins enclosure for our Block. However, first of anything else, I desired the wonderful tomatoes from the Where-Where Mountains. In my mind’s eye, I already could see their round ripe sides gleaming with solid red.

So it was a whole day of waiting for the hour when adults start to come after their children, when I promptly declined going home with someone else's mother, "No, thank you, I go with the boys to reach Block sooner."

The 4 of us went out of the gate but we didn't take the short trail thru the forest. Instead, we turned left to follow the wide dirt road on which there never appeared any vehicle. The road went uphill and then dived with a tilt, and I kept looking out around and asking the same question about when the Where-Where Mountains would stand out. However, as the answers were getting more and more curt and reluctant, I kept down the eager question not to put at risk my taking part in the tomato adventure.

We went out to the road with the streaks of melting black tar over the joints of concrete slabs in the road surface. I knew that road which went down from the Gorka blocks towards the House of Officers. We did not follow it though and only crossed into the thicket of supple bushes cut with a narrow trail which brought us to a house of gray logs with a sign hanging above its door for those who could read.

The boys did not go any farther. They started dawdling aimlessly between the bushes and the weathered-gray logs in the house walls until an adult unclie came out of the door and crossly ordered us away. Our leader answered his parents sent him to pick up the newspapers and mail, but the unclie grew even more angry, and I went home well taught what they mean by mentioning the Where-Where Mountains…

Yet, I still believed that adventures and travels would certainly come my way and getting ready for them was the must. That's why, spotting a maverick box of matches upon the kitchen table, I grabbed it without a moment's hesitation or delay—you have to train yourself to get the knack at vital arts, right?

A couple of initial attempts proved that lighting a match against its box side was something easy indeed. And there at once popped up the urge to proudly demonstrate to someone my newly acquired skills. Who to? To Sasha and Natasha, sure thing, they would be much more impressed than Grandma. Besides, my authority by them called for repair and restoration after all the recent flops.

> (…however, this list of motives is made by me in hindsight, from the immeasurably distant future—my current present over this here fire loaded with potatoes to bake.
>
> But then, in that immeasurably distant past, without any philosophizing and logical justifications, I perfectly knew that…)

I should call the younger ones to some hide-out and show them my apt control of the fire. The most suitable place was, of course, under the parents' bed in their room, where we crawled in the Indian file. At the sight of matches in my hands Natasha oh-ohed in a warning whisper. Sasha kept silent and watched the process closely.

The first match caught fire but went out too soon. The second developed a good flame, yet all of a sudden it swayed too close to the mesh of tulle bed cover hanging down by the wall. The narrow tip of the fire bent forward, the upturned icicle of yellow flame burst thru the tulle forming a black, ever-widening, gap. For some time I watched the scene before I guessed its meaning and shouted to my sister-'n'-brother, "Fire! Run away! Fire!" But those little fools stayed where they were and only boohooed in duet.

I got out from under the bed and ran across the landing to the Zimins' where my Mom and Grandma were sitting in the kitchen of Paulyna Zimin over the tea she treated them to. On my skimble-skamble announcement of fire alarm, the three women dashed across the landing. I was the last to reach our apartment.

Under the ceiling of the hallway, leisurely revolved fat curls of yellowish smoke. The bedroom door stood open to the show of half-meter-tall flames of fire dancing merrily upon the parents' bed. The room was filled with a white-blue mist and somewhere within it, the twins were still howling.

Grandma pulled the mattress and all from the bed down to the floor and joined the number with the brisk step by her slippers over the fire accompanying the lively kicks by loud calls to her God. Mom yelled to Sasha and Natasha to get out from under the bed mesh. The fire jumped over onto the tulle curtain of the balcony door and Grandma pulled it down with her bare hands. In the kitchen, Paulyna Zimin rattled the saucepans against the sink filling them with water from the tap. Mom took the twins to the children's room, came running back, and told me to go over there too.

We sat on the big sofa silent, heeding the to-and-fro racing in the corridor, uninterrupted swish of water from the tap in the kitchen, the stray exclamations of the women. What now?

Then the noise little by little abated, the hallway door clicked behind departing auntie Paulyna. From the parents' bedroom there came the sound of mop taps as at the floor washing, from time to time the splash of water poured down into the bowl was heard from the toilet room.

The door opened. Mom stood there with a wide seaman belt in her hand. "Come here!" she called without giving any name, but the 3 of us knew perfectly well who was summoned.

And then there reigned silence—some complete, suspended, silence... I stood up and went to catch hell... We met in the middle of the room, under the silk shade from the ceiling. "Don't you ever dare, you, piece of a rascal!" she said and swayed the belt.

I cringed. The slap fell on the shoulder. It was just a slap, not a blow – no pain at all. Mom turned around and left. I was stunned by so light a punishment. It's nothing compared to what I'd be surely shown by Dad when he comes home from work and sees the bandaged hands of Grandma after applying vegetable oil to the burns…

When the door clicked in the hallway and Dad's voice said, "What the… er… What happened here?", Mom hurried over there from the kitchen. All that she said was not heard but I made out these words, "I've already punished him, Kolya."

Dad went into the parents' bedroom to estimate the damage and very soon entered our room. "Ew, you!" was all he told me.

For a few days, the apartment had a strong smell of smoke. The runner from the parents' bedroom was cut up into smaller pieces. The remnants of the tulle curtain and burned bed were taken out to the garbage enclosure across the road. A couple of years later I could read already and whenever coming across a matchbox with the warning sticker: "Keep matches away from children!", I knew that it was about me too…

~ ~ ~

This question puzzles me till now: what at that tender age made me so cocksure that in future they would be writing books about me. The certainty was spiced by a pepper-hot pinch of shame that set my cheeks a-glow at the thought that future writers when touching my childhood years would have to admit frankly that, yes, even being a big boy, a first-grader actually, I sometimes peed in bed at night, though Dad just couldn't hold back his exasperation because at my age he no longer made puddles in his bed. Never!

Or take that terrible occurrence when on the way from school my tummy got squeezed by unbearable colic which made me run home to the toilet room, but there everything stopped halfway, in spite of all my straining, until Grandma, terrified by my heartrending howls, rushed from the kitchen to the toilet and, snatching a piece of newspaper from the bag on the wall, ripped the stubborn turd out.

Who would ever dare write things like that in a book?!..

> (…already in another—my present—life the current wife of mine, Sahtic, went to a fortune teller in the war-destroyed city of Shushi when our son Ahshaut fled the local army because of harassment by his company commander and regular beating up at the guardhouse.
>
> In the year of Ahshaut's birth, the USSR was ripping apart at all seams, some new life was promising to start, instilling hope that before he grew of age there would be no army drafts but only contract enrollment of volunteers. And why not? "You never know the Devils' next joke," quoting a Russian byword. Well, in my dream's case, the SOB was not in the mood for joking.
>
> The commander of the company, handled Chokha, picked on Ahshaut because of his own dissatisfaction with the unfair arrangement of life—after the Karabakh war his combat bros became generals with hanging stomachs and personal Jeeps equipped with drivers while he, Chokha, was still rotting at the front line.

After Ahshaut was missing for eight days, Sahtic went to Shushi, to the popular fortune-teller who assured her that everything would be alright. And so it happened. Ahshaut came home, we took him back to the place of his service, to higher ranked officers in the chain of command than Captain Chokha, and our boy was transferred to another regiment, in a hotter spot, where he served the remaining year, though already without the sergeant stripes in his shoulder straps…

So then, in the process of seeing the future, the seer shared additional information, kinda a bonus for turning to her, that my Grandma, though in the other world already, was ill at ease on my behalf and lighting up a candle on her behalf in this here world would relieve her over there. My Grandma's name (so the fortune teller) was almost like that of Maria, only a little different...

I was utterly flabbergasted by the accuracy of the extrasensory guess. Maria and Martha are indeed very similar names of the two sisters from the Gospel. Leo Taxil assures that even Jesus Himself sometimes confused the chicks…

And when my Grandma turned 98, she also began to forget her own name. On such days she sought her daughter's help, "Lyaksandra, I keep wondering lately—what could my name be?"

Well, yes, Aunt Alexandra was also a good sort, "Oy, Mom! But I can't recollect either! May it be, Anyuta?"

"No … Somehow different it was…"

And three days later she would triumphantly announce to her daughter, "I remembered! Martha, I am. Martha!."

No wonder the fortune teller couldn't deliver her exact name…

However, by this flashforward, I jumped ahead way too much because it's me who had to serve in the army first, but in this here letter to you, I'm still at the kindergarten senior group.

I think I'd better turn off the tap that pours profound hooey on infantile megalomania, and return to the period when kindergarten was completing its share in the formation of my personality…)

Now, back to the pivotal 1961… What is remarkable about it (besides my graduating the senior group at the Object's kindergarten)?

Well, firstly, whichever way you somersault this figure it'll still remain "1961".

Additionally, in April the usual flow of programs from the radio on the wall in our room cut off yet didn't die transmitting static for quite a while before the toll-like voice of Levitan chimed out

that in an hour there would be read an important government declaration. Grandma started sighing and stealthily crossing herself… However, at the appointed time when all of the family gathered in the children's room, Levitan gleefully announced the first manned spaceflight by our countryman Yuri Gagarin who in 108 minutes flew around the globe and opened a new era in the history of mankind.

In Moscow and other big-time cities of the Soviet Union, people walked the streets in an unplanned demonstration, straight from their workplaces, in robes and overalls, some carrying large paper sheets of handmade placards: "We are the first! Hooray!" And at the Object in our children's room full of bravura marches by orchestras from the radio on the wall, Dad was impatiently driving it home to Mom and Grandma, "Well, and so what's not clear, eh?! They put him on a rocket and he flew around!"

The special plane with Yuri Gagarin on board was nearing Moscow and, still in the air, he got promoted from Lieutenant straight to Major. Fortunately, the plane had a stock of military outfit and at the airport he descended the airplane stairs with a big star in each of the shoulder straps of his light-gray officer's greatcoat to march in parade step, fine and proper, along the carpet runner stretched from the plane to the government in raincoats and hats. The laces in his polished shoes somehow untied on the way and whipped by this or that loose end the carpet runner at each stomping step, but he did not lose his demeanor and in the general jubilation no one even noticed them.

> (…many years later watching the footage of the familiar newsreel, I suddenly saw them though before that as, probably, all other viewers, I could only stare at his face and the well-trained marching in.
>
> Did he notice himself? I don't know. But all the same, he came up so confidently and, holding his hand to the peak of his forage cap reported that the mission assigned by the Party and Government had been successfully accomplished…)

Standing under the wall radio at the Object, I had a fairly faint idea about bestriding a rocket in its flight, but if Dad said so, then that was the way to open a new era…

A month or two later there came the monetary reform. Instead of being large and long pieces of paper, the rubles shrunk considerably, yet kopecks remained the same. The mentioned as well as less obvious details of the reform became the standing subject in frequent agitated discussions by adults in the kitchen.

In an effort to join the world of grown-ups, at one of such debates, I stood up in the middle of the kitchen and proclaimed that those new one-ruble bills were disgustingly yellow and Lenin in them did not look like Lenin at all but like some petty deuce. Dad threw a brief glance at the couple of neighbors participating in the discourse and crisply told me not to mess around with conversations of elders and better go right away to the children's room.

Though hurt, I bore the offense silently and left. But why if Grandma might say whatever she wanted, why wasn't I allowed to?. Especially, that at times I heard Mom's praises for my

intelligence in her chatter to the neighbor women, “He happens to ask questions that even I have no answer to!” From those words, I felt proud tingling up inside the nose as after a hearty gulp of lemonade or fizzy water.

> (…what if my megalomania took roots right there?
>
> However, the setback at the exchange on the new money served me a good lesson – no plagiarizing from your grandma, be kind to present the wits of your own, if only there are any…
>
> And, by the way, about the nose. When visiting homes of other people, be it a neighboring apartment or, say, in separate houses, like that of Dad’s friend Zatseppin, there was felt some kind of smell. Not necessarily rancid, yet always there, and it was different from place to place. Only at our home, there was no smack whatsoever…)

In the summer of 1961, the adults of the Gorka blocks took great interest in volleyball. After her work and home chores, Mom put on her sportswear and went out to the volleyball grounds, at a stone’s throw across the road, alongside the Bugorok-Knoll that looked like one of the hills in *The Russian Epic Tales.* The games were played by the “knock-out system” with the teams replacing one another till the velvety night darkness condensed around the yellowish bulb up on the lonely log lamppost nigh the volleyball grounds. The players chided each other for failures or hotly lambasted the opposite team’s protestations, but no one dared to argue with the umpire because he sat so high and silenced protesters by his whistle blows.

The on-lookers also rotated. They came and went, scream-and-shouted along with the game, manned teams of their own, slapped themselves to kill a biting mosquito or paddled the buzzing scourges away with green broad-leaved branches.

And I was there and also fed the mosquitoes, yet they are just a dim recollection while I remember dearly the rare feel of communion and belonging – all around were us and we were our very own people. Such a pity that some of us have to leave and go, but—see!—there are others coming. Ours. We.

> (…so long ago was all that… Before the TV and the WIFI split us up and shoved into separate cells…)

~ ~ ~

With the nearing autumn, Mom started to teach me reading the ABC book, which was full of pictures and strings of letters skewered with dashes to aid at making the words up. Yet even spitted, the letters stayed reluctant to fuse into something sensible. At times, I tried to skulk and, staring at the picture next to the word, read: “Arr-hay-eye-enn. Rain!”

But Mom answered, “Stop cheating! It’s a “c-l-o-u-d”.

I poohed, and eeewed, and started over again converting the syllables into words, and in a few weeks I could already sing thru the texts at the end of the book where the harvester was mowing wheat in the collective farm field…

Grandma Martha's worldview was not in the least affected by the Yuri Gagarin's statement for the journalists that, while on his flight, he saw no God up there. On the contrary, she started an anti-atheistic propaganda and covert conversion of her eldest grandkid. She insistently advised me to mark well that God knew everything, could do anything and, most importantly, was able to fulfill your wishes. And in exchange for what? Just for praying regularly, as simple as that! Such a trifle, ain't it? But then at school, I, with God's help, would have no problems. The grade of "five" is needed? Just say a prayer and – get it! Some good trade, eh?.

And I wavered. I succumbed to her temptation and, even though never disclosing it, I turned a clandestine believer on my own. As no one enlightened me what a believer had to do, I came to inventing the rituals myself. Going out to play in the Courtyard, I for a second dropped behind the narrow door to the basement and there, in the darkness, pronounced—not even in whisper but silently, in my mind, "Alright, God, you know all yourself. See? I'm crossing me." And I put a sign of the cross somewhere about my navel…

However, when before school there remained just a couple of days, something made me revolt and I became an apostate. I renounced Him. And I did it out loud. Openly. I went into the grassy grounds by the garbage bins enclosure and shouted at the top of my lungs, "There's no god!"

And though there was no one around—not a single soul—I still took proper precautions, just in case if somebody would overhear accidentally, say, from behind the fencing around the garbage bins. "Aha!" they would think, "Now that boy shouts there is no god, which makes it clear even for a fool that till lately he has believed there was some." And that was surely a shame for a boy who in a few days would become a schoolboy. For that reason, instead of articulating the blasphemous renunciation clearly, I took care to howl it with indistinct vowels: "Ou ou ouu!"

Nothing happened.

Turning my face upward, I hollered it once again and then, in a way of putting the final period in my relations with God, I spat in the sky.

Neither thunder nor lightning followed, only I felt the drizzle of spittle landing on my cheeks. So it was not a period but the dots of ellipsis. Not too much of a difference. And I went home liberated…

~ ~ ~

> (…the microscopic spittle fallout that sprinkled, in the aftermath of the God-defying spit in the sky, the upturned face of the seven-year-old I, proved up to the hilt my inability to draw conclusions from the personal experience: a handful of sand, when thrown up, invariably came back down. Additionally, it demonstrated my complete ignorance of Sir Isaac Newton's conclusions in his law on the respective matters.

In short, it was really time for the young atheist to plop into the inescapable tide of compulsory school education…)

The never-ending summer of the pivotal year pitied, at last, the little ignoramus and handed me over to September when, dressed in a bluish suit with shiny pewter buttons, my forelock trimmed in the real hair salon for grown-up men, where Mom took me the day before, clutching in my right hand the stalks in the newspaper-wrapped bunch of Dahlias brought the previous night from the small front garden of Dad's friend Zatseppin who had a black motorcycle with a sidecar—I went for the first time to the first grade, escorted by Mom. I cannot remember whether she was holding my hand or I succeeded at my claim of being big enough to carry both the flowers and the schoolbag of dark brown leatherette.

We walked down the same road from which since long had disappeared the black columns of *zeks* though the sun shined as brightly as in their days. On that sunny morning, the road was walked by other than me first-graders with their parents and brand-new leatherette schoolbags, as well as by older, differently aged, schoolchildren, marching both separately and in groups. However, down the tilt, we did not turn to the all too familiar trail towards kindergarten but went straight ahead to the wide-open gate of the Recruit Depot Barracks. We crossed their empty yard and left it thru the side gate, and walked uphill along another, yet unknown, trail between the tall grayish trunks of Aspen.

From the pass, there started again a protracted tilt downward thru the leafy forest with a swamp on the right, after which a short, yet steep, climb led up to the road entering the open gate of the school grounds encircled by the openwork timber fence.

Inside the wide enclosure, the road ended by the short flight of concrete steps ascending to a concrete walk to the entrance of the two-story school building with 2 rows of wide frequent windows.

We did not enter but stopped outside the school and stood there for a long time, while bigger schoolchildren kept running roundabout and were yelled at by adults.

Then we, the first-graders, were lined to face the school. Our parents stayed behind us but still there, the runners ceased their scamper while we stood clutching our flower bunches and new schoolbags until told to form pairs and follow an elderly woman heading inside. And we awkwardly moved forward. One girl in our column burst into tears, her mother ran up to silence her sobs and urge her to keep walking.

I looked back at my Mom. She waved and smiled, and said something which I could not already hear. Black-haired, young, beautiful…

~ ~ ~

At home, Mom announced that everyone praised Seraphima Sergeevna Kasyanova as a very experienced teacher and it was so very good I got into her class.

For quite a few months, the experienced teacher kept instructing us in writing propped by the faded horizontal lines in special copybooks, crisscrossed by slanting ones, whose purpose was to develop identical right slant in our handwritings and all that period we were allowed to use nothing but pencils. We scribbled endless lines of leaning sticks and hooks which were supposed to become, later, in the due course, parts of letters written with an elegant bent even without the propping lines in the pages of ruled paper. It took an eternity and one day before the teacher's information that we got readied for using pens and should bring them to school the following day together with no-spill ink-wells and replaceable nibs.

Those dip pens—slender wooden rods in lively monochrome color with cuffs of light tin at one end for the insertion of a nib—I kept bringing with me from the first school day under the long sliding lid in a wooden pencil-box. As for the plastic no-spill ink-wells, they indeed prevented the spillage of ink holding it in between their double walls if the ink-well got accidentally knocked over or deliberately turned upside down.

The pen's nib was dipped into the ink-well, but not too deep because if you picked up too much of ink with the nib tip, the ink would drop down into the page—oops!—a splotch again… One dip was enough for a couple of words and then – dip the nib anew.

At school, each desk had a small round hollow in the middle of its front edge to place one ink-well for the pair of students sharing it to dip, in turn, their pens' nibs in. The replaceable nib had a bifurcated tip, however, its halves, pressed tightly to each other, were leaving on the paper a hair-thin line (if you didn't forget to dip the pen's nib into the ink-well beforehand). Slight pressure applied to the pen in writing made nib's halves part and draw a wider line. The alteration of thin and bold lines with gradual transitions from one into another presented in the illustrious samples of the penmanship textbook drove me to despair by their unattainable calligraphy refinement…

Much later, already as a third-grade student, I mastered one more application of dip pen's nibs. Stab an apple with a nib and revolve it inside for one full rotation, then pulling the nib out you'll have a little cone of the fruit's flesh in it, while in the apple side there appeared a neat hole, into which you can insert the extracted cone, reversely. Got it? You've created a horned apple.

Then you may add more of such horns until the apple starts looking like a sea mine or a hedgehog – depending on the perseverance of the artificer. Finally, you can eat your piece of art but I, personally, never liked the taste of the resultant apple mutant…

And after one more year at school, in the fourth grade, you learned the way of turning the dip pen's nib into a missile. First, break off one of the halves in the sharp tip of the nib to make it even sharper, then split the opposite insertion butt-end and jam into the crack a tiny piece of paper folded into four-wing tail-stabilizer to obtain bee-line flying mode.

Now, throw your dart into some wooden thing—the door, the blackboard, a window frame would equally do—the prickly nib's half will pierce deep enough to keep the missile sticking out from the target…

The trail to school had become quite familiar, yet each time a little different. The foliage fell, the droughts began roaming between the naked tree trunks and the school was peeping thru them even before you reached the big Aspen by the swamp, on whose smooth bark there stood the knife-cut inscription: “It’s where the youtth is wasted”.

> (…until now the literary magazine *The Youth* shocks me with a crying deficiency they spell the periodical's name with…)

Then the snowfalls began, however, by the end of the day, the wide path thru deep snowdrifts to the school got trodden anew. The sun sparkled blindingly from both sides of that road to knowledge transformed into a trench with orange marks of urine on its snow walls. Totally obliterated by the next snowfall, they would persistently pop up again at other spots in the restored and deepened trench-trail thru the forest…

A few weeks before the New Year, our class finished studying the primer and Seraphima Sergeevna brought us to the school library, a narrow room with one window on the second floor. There she introduced us to the librarian as accomplished readers who had the right to visit her and borrow books for our personal reading at home.

That day, returning home with my first book, I stretched upon the big sofa and never left it but only turned from one side to the other, and from my tummy to my back, until finished the entire book which was a fairy-tale about the city with narrow streets walked by tall hammer-creatures who banged on the heads of shorter bell-creatures to make them ring. Just so a story by Aksakov about a music-playing snuff-box…

~ ~ ~

Winter evenings were so hasty rides, you had barely had your meal and scribbled away your calligraphy home assignment when – look! – it’s already deep dusk outside the window.

Yet, even the dark could not cancel the social life and you hurriedly put your felt boots on, and pulled warm pants over them, and got into your winter coat followed by the fur hat and – off you ran to the Gorka! How far away? Just around the corner! Because “the Gorka” indicated not only the two blocks as well as the whole upland but also that very tilt towards the Recruit Depot Barracks which we walked down on our way to school.

With its well-trodden snow, the Gorka served ideally for riding sleds. The start was taken from the concrete road surrounding the blocks. The deep rut left in the snow by tires of random cars confirmed that the road was still there and so did the bulbs shedding the light from their lamppost tops. One of those posts marked the start in the Sleigh Gorka. The cone of yellow light from its bulb drew a blurred circle—the meeting place for the sledding fans crowd.

Most of the sleds were a store purchase, you could see it by their aluminum runners and multi-colored cross-plank seats. Mine was made by Dad though. It was shorter and made of steel and much speedier than those store-bought things.

After a short run pushing the sled downhill with your hands on the backrest, you plonked with your tummy upon the seat and flew away to the foot of the hillock drowned in the dark of night pricked only by the lonely distant light above the gate of the Recruit Depot Barracks that bounced in time with the leaps and jerks of your fleeting sled. And the speed wind pressed tears out of your eyes.

When the sled came to a stop, you picked up the icy rope run thru two holes in the sled's nose and stomped back uphill. The sled tamely ran after you, now and then knocking its muzzle against the heels of your felt boots. And with the approach of the roadside lamp, myriads of living sparks started to wink at you from the roadside snowdrifts varying their twinkle with each step.

Gee! Up there atop the Gorka, they already started to marshal a train of sleds, hitching them to each other and – hup-ho! – off the whole mass and wild screams and the frosty screech of sled runners went into the darkness…

At some point, probably, as thousands other boys both before me and after, I did something which should never be done, and we knew it all along that it was a no-no, yet the sled's nose in the light of the bulb shimmered so beautifully with all those tiny frost-sparks that we couldn't resist and licked it. Sure thing, as we knew beforehand, the tongue got stuck to the frost-gripped metal and we had to rip it off back with pain, and shame, and hope that no one noticed the folly inappropriate for so big a boy.

Then you plodded home, dragging your sled along with stiff hands and dropped it by the basement's door in the staircase-entrance vestibule. You climbed upstairs to the second floor landing and knocked at your apartment door with your felt boots, and in the hallway your Mom pulled off your mittens with a bead of ice stuck to each filament of their wool, disclosing the white icicles of your hands.

She would run out into the yard to scoop up a basinful of snow and rub your senseless hands with it, and order to put them in the saucepan in the kitchen sink under the cold water running from the tap. And life would start to slowly come back to your hands. You'd whine from the piercing needles of unbearable pain in your fingers, and Mom would yell at you, "Serves you right! You, rascal roamer! You, bitter woe of mine!."

And though still whimpering from the pain in your stiff fingers and in your tongue skinned by the savage frosty iron, you'd know for sure that everything will be fine because your Mom knew how to save you…

~ ~ ~

After the winter holidays, Seraphima Sergeevna brought to the classroom an issue of the newspaper *The Pioneer Pravda* and instead of the lesson she was reading aloud the news about Nikita Khrushchev's promise that in 20 years we all would live in Communism built by that time in our state.

Coming back home, I shared the delightful news that in 20 years that day we were going to live in Communism when any item at the store would be given just for asking because at school they told us so. To that announcement, my parents only exchanged silent glances, yet abstained from partaking in my festive mood on account of so bright a future. I decided not to bother them any longer, but deep in my mind started arithmetic calculations to discover that being around in Communism at the age of seven-and-twenty, I wouldn't be too badly old, still having some time to enjoy free things...

By that time all the pupils of our class had already become Octoberists, for which occasion a group of grown-up fifth-graders visited our classroom to pin Octoberist badges on our school uniforms. The badge was a small scarlet star of five tips around the yellow frame in the center out of which, as if from a medallion, peeped the angelic face of Volodya Ulyanov sporting long golden locks in his early childhood when playing with his sister he ordered her, "March out from under the sofa!." And later he grew up, lost his hair and became Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and they wrote a great many books about him…

At home, there appeared a filmstrip projector – a clumsy device with a set of lenses in its nose tube, as well as a box of small plastic barrels to keep tight dark scrolls of filmstrips. Among the filmstrips, there happened some old acquaintances – the one about the hero of the Civil War, Zhelezniak the Seaman, another about the little daughter of a revolutionary, who smartly dropped the typesetting sorts, brought by her father for printing underground leaflets, into a jug of milk when the police raided their house late at night. They never had brains enough to check under the milk…

Of course, it was I who loaded the filmstrips and then rotated the black scroll-wheel to move the projected frames. And I also read the inscriptions under the pictures, which did not last long though, because my sister-'n'-brother learned them by heart and retold before the whole frame would creakily creep down into the rectangular of light shed onto the wallpaper.

The challenge to my seniority from Natasha did not hurt so bitterly as Sasha's disobedience. Just so recently as we two pranced, panting, into the kitchen to still our thirst with water from the tap, he readily conceded the white tin mug, adorned with the revolutionary battleship Aurora's imprint on its side, to me as to the elder, bigger, brother. And emptying half of it, I generously handed the mug back for him to finish off the water, after all, that was the way for strength transmitting. How come that I became so strong? Because, without silly prissiness, I drank a couple of gulps from the bottle of water started by Sasha Nevelsky, the strongest boy in our class.

My younger brother listened with trust to my naive claptrap and dutifully grabbed the outstretched mug… Like me, he was over-credulous and once at midday meal, when Dad took out from his soup plate a cartilage without meat and announced: who'd gnaw it up was to get a

prize—one kilo of gingerbread, Sasha volunteered and, after protracted munching, managed to swallow the cartilage but never got the promised sweetmeat, probably Dad forgot his promise…

A parcel arrived from the post-office, or rather Mom dropped in there to pick it on her way home after work, that box of faded plywood secured by a string glued to its sides with brown blobs of stamped sealing wax, with two addresses in block blue letters on its top: to our numbered mailbox from the city of Konotop.

The parcel was set on a stool in the kitchen and all of the family gathered around. The lid with the addresses, nailed firmly and aplenty, had to be removed by application of a big kitchen knife used as a lever, and revealed a sizable lump of lard, and a red hot-water bottle of hooch gurgling in between its rubber sides. The rest of the space within the box was filled to the brims with black sunflower seeds.

When slightly scorched in a frying pan, the seeds became simply delicious. We crushed them with our teeth, piled hulls away into a saucer placed in the center of the kitchen table, and enjoyed those small but so tasty, sharp-nosed, hearts.

And then Mom said if not eating them just so, one after another, but you amass, say, half a glass of husked seeds then add a sprinkle of sugar, that would be a treat indeed. Each of her 3 children was handed a tea glass to collect the hearts into. Instead of a saucer, Mom equipped us with 1 deep plate for all, and deftly rolled a huge cornet of a newspaper which she filled with the fried seeds.

We left the adults to eat unsweetened seeds in the kitchen and went over to the children's room, where we lay upon the pieces of the carpet runner frizzled in the fire of long-ago past. As it should be expected, the level of peeled hearts in Natasha's glass rose quicker than in ours, although she jabbered more than cracked. But when even my brother began to overtake me, I felt hurt.

The slowness of my progress resulted from considering a cartoon on the side of the newspaper cornet, a pot-bellied colonialist blasted off away from the continent of Africa, the black imprint of a boot kick in the seat of his white shorts. So I dropped the distracting contemplation of his flight and tried to husk faster, exercising a stricter self-control too, so as not to accidentally chew some of the harvested hearts, however, all my struggle for catching up with the younger proved useless.

The door opened and Mom entered the room with a half-glass of sugar and sprinkled a teaspoon of it over our personal achievements, but I was already sick and tired of them those foolish seeds, no matter sugared or not, and in my following life I stayed indifferent forever to the delights of sunflower seed orgies.

> (…but still and all, consumption of seeds is much more than a trifling pastime combined with a sapid side-effect, no!. it's grown into a real art in itself.

To start with the purely Slavonic lavish way of eating them in the "piggy" style when the hollowed, or simply chewed together with the hearts, black hulls are not vivaciously spat out over the nearby environs, nope, they are set instead, by sluggish pushes of the tongue, on the move from out the corner of the mouth and keep sliding in a mutual, saliva-moisturized, mass down the chin to finally plop onto the eater's chest. Excessive satiety, yes.

Or for a contrast, again a Slavonic but this time graceful "filigree" style when seeds are tossed by the snacker, one after another, into their mouth from a distance no less than twenty-five centimeters (20").

And so on, down to the chaste Transcaucasia manner, when a seed for crushing is fed into the (yes, inescapably) mouth from a fixed position between the thumb tip and the joint of the index finger, so as to screen the intake of the seed, and then the processed husk is not spat out randomly but carefully returned into the burka-like contrivance of finger-screen to be scattered somewhere, or collected into something.

On the whole, the last of the presented methods leaves an impression of the eater biting their own thumb on the sly. But at who?

" Did you bite your thumb at me, Sir?!."

Oh, yes, sunflower seeds are miles aloft of dull popcorn. However, that's more than enough about them.

Back to the green, cut-up, carpet runner…)

It was on those runner pieces where my brother felled my authority of the eldest by 1 dire blow... That day coming home after a PE lesson, I thoughtlessly stated that performing one hundred squats at one go was beyond human power. Sasha silently sniffled for a while and then said that he could do it.

Natasha and I were keeping the count, and after the fifteenth squat, I yelled that it was all wrong and unfair because he didn't fully rise, but Sasha went on with squats as if I never said a word, and Natasha continued to keep the count. I shut up and soon after joined my sister in counting, though after "eighty-one!" he could no longer rise even above his bent knees. I felt pity for my brother over-strained by those incomplete squats. He staggered, tears welled up in his eyes, but the count was brought to a hundred and he barely hobbled to the big sofa. My authority collapsed like the colonialism in Africa; good news that before the fall I hadn't promised any gingerbread…

~ ~ ~

Where did the filmstrip projector come from? Most likely, our parents bought it from a store. And in their room there appeared Radiola—combination of the radio and record player. 2 in 1, as they call it now.

The lid on top and both sidewalls of Radiola shed gentle gleam of brown varnish. The rear side had no gloss because it was hard cardboard with multiple rows of tiny portholes facing the wall. However, pulling Radiola a little forward, you could peep thru them and catch a patchy view of the murky interior landscape: the white of aluminum panel-houses, the dim glow in the pearly black turrets of vacuum-lamps of different height and thickness, and from one of those holes, a brown cable ran out ending by the plug for a mains socket.

Over the Radiola's face was pulled a special sound-friendly cloth thru which you easily could trace the big oval speaker beneath the round sleeping eye whose glass flashed up with green when you clicked on the Two-in-One on. The long low plate of glass inserted along the front side bottom bridged the control knobs: the power and volume adjustment (2 in 1) above the range selection switch on the right, and only one knob on the left—for fine-tuning to the wavelength. The glass plate was glossy black except for four horizontal transparent stripes, from end to end, marked with irregular hair-width vertical snicks and the names of capital cities, like, Moscow, Bucharest, Warsaw. While twirling the knob of fine adjustment, you could follow, thru those transparent stripes in the glass, the progress of the thin red slider crawling from city to city along the inner side of the plate.

The radio was not very interesting though, it hissed and cracked and swished along with the slider movements, sometimes there would float up an announcer's voice reading the news in some unknown Bucharestian language, a little farther along the stripe it would be replaced with a Russian voice repeating the news from the wall radio. Yet, lifting the lid on top of Radiola, you kinda opened a tiny theater with the round stage of red velvet having a shining pin in the center to slip on it the hole in a record disk when loading it on the pad. Next to it, the slightly crooked poker of the white plastic adapter sat on its stand.

With the turntable switched on and spinning the disk, the adapter had to be carefully picked up from its stand, brought over the whirling disk's surface and lowered in between the wide-set initial grooves running round and round and after a couple of hissing turns there would start a song about Chico-Chico from Costa Rica, or about O, Mae Caro, or about a war soldier marching in a field along the steep river bank.

The cabinet under Radiola held a stack of paper envelopes with gleaming black disks made at the record factory in the Aprelev City whose name was printed on the round labels about the center hole, beneath the song's title, and the name of the singer, and the instruction that the rotation speed was 78 rpm.

Next to the adapter's perch, there was the gearshift lever with notches for 33, 45, and 78 rpm. Disks of 33 rpm were much narrower and spun slower than 78 rpm disks, but they—so small—had two songs on each side!

Natasha shared it with us that when you launched a 33 rpm disk at the speed of 45 rpm then even the Soviet Army Choir named after Aleksandrov began to sing with Lilliputian puppet voices…

~ ~ ~

Dad never was too keen on reading. He read nothing but *The Radio* magazine full of schematic blueprints of capacitor-resistor-diodes, which every month appeared in the mailbox on our apartment door. And, since Dad was a Party man, they also put there the daily *Pravda* and the monthly *The Blocknote of Agitator* filled with the hopelessly dense text running for one or two endless paragraphs per page and not a single picture in the whole issue except for Lenin's profile on the cover.

Because of his Party membership, twice a week Dad attended the Party Studies Evening School, if it was his “dog watch” week. He went there after work to write down the lessons in a thick copybook of leatherette covers because after two years of studying Dad had to pass a very difficult exam.

From one of the evening classes, Dad brought home a couple of Party textbooks, which they distributed among the Party members who attended the Party Studies Evening School. However, he never opened even those books, which, as it turned out, was his mistake. The bitter fruit of his neglect came out 2 years later when in one of those Party books he found his stash—a part of salary concealed from the wife for expenses at one’s own discretion. Full of heartfelt regret and belated self-reproach lamented Dad over the find, because the stash was in the money used before the monetary reform which turned it into funny papers…

Among the many names used for the Object where we lived, there also was that of “Zona”, the vestige from those times when *zeks* were building the Object. (Z*eks* live and toil in “Zonas” as know all and everyone.) At the end of the second academic year at the Party Studies Evening School, Dad and other learners were taken for their examination “out of Zona” – to the nearest district center. Dad was noticeably worried and kept repeating that he knew not a damn thing, although his thick copybook was already written down to the almost very end. And who cared, dammit, argued Dad, for another year at that Party Studies Evening School!

From Out-of-Zona he returned in a very merry mood because at the examination he had got a feeble “3” and now all his evenings would be free. Mom asked how come he passed the exam without knowing a damn thing. Then Dad opened his copybook for Party Studies and showed his good-luck charm—a pencil drawing of an ass with long ears and brush-like tail, which he made during the exam on the last page and, beneath the animal, inscribed his magic formula: “pull-me-thru!”

I did not know if Dad’s story was really worth believing because he laughed so much while telling it. So I decided that I’d better not say anyone about the ass who pulled my Dad from the Party Studies Evening School…

Mom was a regular book reader in our family. Going to her workplace, she took them along for reading in her time at the Pumping Station. Those books were borrowed from the Library of Detachment. (Yes, one more name because we lived not only in the Object-Zona-Mailbox but also in the Military Detachment number so and so.)

The library wasn’t too far away, about one kilometer of walking. First, down the concrete road, until, at the Gorka’s foot, it was crossed by the asphalt road and, after the intersection, the

concrete road got replaced with the dirt-road street between two rows of wooden houses behind their low fencing and strips of narrow front gardens. The street ended by the House of Officers, but about a hundred meters before it there was a turn to the right, towards the one-story brick building of the Detachment's Library.

Sometimes, Mom took me with her down there and, while she was exchanging her books in the back of the building, I waited in the big empty front room where instead of any furniture there hung lots of posters all over the walls. The central poster presented a cross-section outline of the atomic bomb (because the full name of the Object we lived in was the Atomic Object).

Besides the posters with the bomb anatomy and atomic blast mushrooms, there were also pictures about the training of NATO spies. In one of them the spy, who jumped from behind on a sentry's back was tearing the soldier's lips with his fingers. I felt creepy horror but could not look away from it and only thought to myself, O, come on, Mom, please, change the borrowed books sooner.

At one of such visits, I plucked the heart up to ask Mom if I also could borrow books from the library. She answered that, actually, that was the library for adults but still led me to the room where a librarian woman was sitting at her desk on which the stacks of various thick books left only room for a lamp and the long plywood box beneath it, filled with the readers' cards, and my Mom told her that she did not know what to do about me because I had already read the entire library they had at school. Since then I always went to the Detachment's Library alone, without Mom. Sometimes, I even exchanged her books and brought them home together with the two or three for me.

The books for my reading were scattered at ready over the big sofa because I read them in a scrambled way. On one of the sofa's armrests, I crawled across the front line together with the reconnaissance group Zvezda on the mission to capture a German officer and, rolling over to the opposite armrest, I continued to gallop with White Chief of Mayne Reid among the cacti of Mexican pampas. And only the solid hardback volume of *The Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece* was, for some reason, read mostly in the bathroom sitting on a low stool with my back leaned against Titan the water-boiler. For such a messy lifestyle Dad handled me "Oblomov", the lazybones whom he remembered from the lessons of Russian Literature at his village school…

~ ~ ~

That winter was endlessly long and full of heavy snowstorms as well as the frost-and-sun intervals, and some quieter snowfalls. Starting for school, I left home at dusk as thick as the night dark. But one day it was thawing and on my way back from school when reaching the tilt between the Recruit Depot Barrack and Block, I marked a strange dark strip to the left from the road.

There I turned and plowing the snow with my felt boots went to see what's up. It was a strip of earth peeping out from under the snow, a patch of the thawed ground sticky with moisture. The next day the opening extended, and some visitor had left in it several blackened Fir-cones. And although in a day the frost gripped tenser, surfaced the snow by a thick rind of ice, and then the

snowfalls set in anew and left no trace of the thaw on the hillside, I knew it for sure that the winter would pass all the same…

In mid-March, at the first class on Monday, Seraphima Sergeevna told us to put our dip pens aside and listen to what she had to say. As it turned out, two days before she went to the bathhouse together with her daughter, and when back home she noticed that her wallet had disappeared with all of her teacher's salary. She was very upset together with her daughter, who told her it's impossible to built Communism with thieves around. But the next day, a man came to their home, a worker from the bathhouse, who had stumbled there on the dropped wallet and figured it out who could lose it the night before, and took it to her place.

And Seraphima Sergeevna said that Communism would surely be built, and there's no doubt about it. Then she also asked us to remember the name of that working man.

> (…but I have already forgotten it because "body dissolves and memory forgets" as it stands in the dictionary by Vladimir Dahl…)

The Saturday bathed in the sun as warm as the spring sun can be. After school and the midday meal at home, I hurried outdoors in the Courtyard where there was a general Subbotnik in progress. People came out of the houses into the bright shining day and shoveled the snow from the concrete walks about the vast Courtyard. Bigger boys loaded the snow in huge cardboard boxes and sledded it aside on a pile where it would not be in the way. In the ditches below the roadsides, they dug deep channels, cutting the snow with shovels and hoisting out entire snow cubes darkly drenched at the bottom. And thru those channels, dark water ran lapping merrily.

So came the spring, and everything started to change every day…

And when at school they handed us the yellow sheets of report cards with our grades, the summer holidays began bringing about the everyday games of Hide-and-seek, *Classlets*, and *Knifelets*.

For the game of Knifelets, you need to choose a level area and draw a wide circle on the ground. The circle is divided into as many sectors as the number of participants who, standing upright, throw a knife, in turn, into the ground which belongs to some of their opponents.

If the hurled knife sticks in, the sector gets split up with the line drawn in the direction determined by the stuck knife's blade sides. The owner of the divided sector has to decide which part of it he wants to keep while the other slice becomes a part of the successful knife-thrower's domain.

A player stays in the game until they retain a patch of ground big enough to accommodate for their standing upon at least one foot, but with no space even for that, the game is over for them and the remaining players go on until there stays just 1. You win!

> (…quoting Alexander Pushkin:

“***Tale is a lie, yet holds some hint and even a lesson to learn…”***

> When playing *knifelets*, all I felt was an overwhelming yen to win. And presently, I can’t help feeling stunned by how readily the whole world’s history gets covered by a simplistic game for kids…)

And we also played matches, which is a game just for 2. Each player sticks their thumb off their fist, inserts a match, a kinda spacer, between their thumb pad and the middle joint of the index finger, and holds it tight. The matches are slowly pressed against each other, the pressure grows and the player whose match withstands it without breaking up becomes the winner. The same idea as in tapping Easter eggs against each other, only you don’t have to wait a whole year for the game which wasted more than one matchbox nicked from the kitchen at home.

Or we just ran hither-thither playing War-Mommy, yelling, “Hurray!”, or “Ta-ta-ta!”

– Bang! Bang! I’ve shot and killed you!

– Yeah! Okay! I’m just on the doorsill to Death!

And long after the nominally dead warrior would keep a-trotting about that doorsill firing his farewell rounds and only, maybe, hooraying less zealously, if it’s a boy possessing some sense of decency, before to slam, at last, that door behind himself and topple with undeniable theatrical gusto in a grass patch of softer looks.

For taking part in War-Mommy you needed a machine-gun sawed from a plank piece. Yet, some boys played automatic weapons of tin, a black-paint-coated acquisition from a store.

Such machine-guns had to be loaded with special ammunition – rolls of narrow paper strips with tiny sulfur blobs planted in them. When struck by the spring trigger hummer, such a blob gave a loud report and the paper strip got automatically pulled on bringing the next blob in the strip in place of the fired… Mom bought me a tin pistol and a box of pistons—small paper circles with the same sulfur blobs which had to be inserted manually for each separate shot. After the bang, a tiny wisp of sore smelling smoke rose from under the trigger.

One day when I was playing the pistol in the sand pile by the garbage enclosure, a boy from the corner building asked me to present the handgun to him and I readily gave it away. Being a son of an officer, he, of course, needed and had more rights to it than me... But Mom refused to believe that anyone would give his gun away to another boy just so casually. She demanded of me to confess the genuine truth about losing Mom’s present, yet I stuck to my truth so stubbornly, that she even had to lead me to the apartment of that boy in the corner building. The officer started to chastise his son, yet Mom said she was so sorry and asked to excuse her because she only wanted to make sure I did not lie.

~ ~ ~

That summer the boys from our Block began to play with yellowish cartridges of real firearms which they were hunting at the shooting range in the forest. I wanted so badly to see what shooting range might look like, yet bigger boys explained that you could visit it only on special days when there was no shooting because on any other day they'd shoo you off.

It took a long wait for a special day, but after all, it came and we went thru the forest... The shooting range was a vast opening about a huge rectangular excavation with a steep cave-in in one of the corners to get down there. The opposite wall of the pit was screened by a tall log barrier, all bullet-poked, keeping a couple shredded left-overs of gravely riddled paper sheets with the head-and-shoulders outline.

We looked for the cartridges in the sand underfoot. They were of two types – longish, neck-narrowed, cartridges from the AK assault-rifle, and small even cylinders from the TT pistol. The finds were loudly welcomed and busily exchanged between the boys. I had no luck at all and only envied the luckier seekers whose shrieks sounded flat and suppressed by the eerie silence of the shooting range displeased with our trespassing the forbidden grounds…

Beside the excavated hollow, the glade was cut across by a front-line trench whose sandy walls were kept in place by board shields. A narrow track of iron rails ran from one end of the opening to the other passing, on the way, the trench over. It was the railway for a large mock-up tank of plywood mounted upon its trolley which rumbled along the track when pulled by the cable of a hand-pedaled winch.

The boys started to play with all those things. I also sat in the trench once, while the plywood tank clanged overhead, and then I went to the call from the edge of the field where they needed my help.

We pulled at the steel cable looped thru the horizontal pulley to make it easier for the boys on the other end of the battlefield to turn the crank of the winch which set in motion the trolley with the tank. At some point, I got inattentive and failed to draw my hand off in time, the cable was quick to snatch and drag my pinky finger into the pulley groove. The pain in the squeezed finger made me rend surroundings by a shrill scream mixed with a jet of tears. Hearing my "oy-oy-oy!" as well as the shouts of other boys around me, "Stop! Finger!", the winch operators managed to stop it when there remained a mere couple of centimeters for my finger to pass the pulley wheel turn and get out. They wound the winch crank in the opposite direction, dragging the poor finger backward all the way to where it was originally swallowed by the device.

The unnaturally flattened, dead pale finger smeared with the blood from the ripped skin, emerged from the pulley jaws and puffed up instantly. The boys wrapped it with my handkerchief and told me to run home. Quick! And I ran thru the forest feeling the painful beat of the pulse in the burning finger…

At home, Mom, without asking anything, at once told me to shove the wounded under the gush of water from the kitchen tap. She bent and straightened it several times and ordered not to bellow like a little cow. Then she bandaged it into a tight white cocoon and promised that by the wedding day it would be like new.

(…and, in the same breathe, childhood is not the nursery of sadomasochism, like, "Whoops, my finger got pinched! Oh, I bumped my head!" It's just that some jolts leave deeper notches in the memory.

Yet, what a pity that the same memory does not retain the admiring state of ongoing discoveries when a speck of sand stuck to a penknife's blade holds countless galaxies and worlds, when any trifle, a scrap of trash, is the promise and pledge of future wanderings and unbelievable adventures.

We grow up gaining the protective armor necessary in the adult world—the doctor's smock on me, the traffic cop's uniform on you. Each of us becomes a necessary cog within the social machine. All needless things—like gaping at fire extinguishers or scanning the strange faces in the frost gripped windowpane—are chopped off…

Now there is a number of old scars on my fingers. This one from an awkwardly wielded knife, here a deep cut by ax, and only on my pinky fingers I cannot find any trace from that pulley injury. Because "body dissolves"...

But, hey! I know much fresher bywords, like that recent one: "summer is a miniature life"…)

When you are a child not only summer but each and every day is a miniature life. The childhood time is slowed down – it does not fly, it does not flow, it does not even move until you push it on. Poor kids would long since got extinct while crossing that boundless desert of the static time, were they not rescued by playing games.

And in that summer, if I got bored with a game or no one was in the Courtyard to play with, I had already a haven, a kinda "home" square in the game of *Classlets*. The big sofa it was, where life ran high indeed, the life full of adventures shared by the heroes from books by Gaidar, Belyaev, Jules Verne… And even outside the big sofa, you can always find a place suitable for all kinds of adventures. Like that balcony by the parents' room, where I once spent a whole summer day reading a book about prehistoric people – Chung and Poma.

There was hair all over their bodies, like by animals, and they lived in the trees. But then a branch accidentally broke off a tree and helped to defend themselves against a saber-tooth tiger, so they started to always carry a stick about them and walk instead of leaping in the trees around. Then there happened a big jungle fire followed by the Ice Age. Their tribe wandered in search of food, learning how to build fire and talk to each other.

In the final chapter, the already old Poma could walk no farther and fell behind the tribe. Her faithful Chung stayed by her side to freeze to death together in the snow. But their children could not wait and just went on because they were already grown up and not so hairy as their parents, and they protected themselves from the cold with the skins of other animals…

The book was not especially thick, yet I read it all day long, while the sun, arisen on the left, from behind the forest outside our Block, was crossing in its indiscernible movement the sky over the Courtyard, towards the sunset on the right, behind the second block.

At some point, in a way of respite from the uninterrupted reading, I slipped out between the iron uprights of the handrail that bounded the balcony and started to promenade outside, along the concrete cornice beyond the safety grating, and it was not scary at all because I tightly grasped the bars, just like Chung and Poma when they were still living in the trees. But some unfamiliar unclie was passing down there that yelled at me and told to get back onto the balcony. He even threatened to inform my parents. However, they were not home so he took his complaint to our neighbors on the first floor. In the evening they told on me to Mom, and I had to promise her to never-never do it again…

~ ~ ~

> (…every road, when you pass it for the first time, seems endlessly long because you cannot measure yet the past part of it against what is still ahead. When passing the same road again and again, it obviously shortens.
>
> That keeps true with the school academic year as well. But I'd never discover it had I left the race at the beginning of the second year at school…)

It was a clear autumn day and our class left school going on the excursion to collect fallen leaves. Instead of Seraphima Sergeevna, who was absent that day, we were supervised by the School Pioneer Leader.

First, she led us thru the forest, then down the street towards the Detachment Library which we didn't reach but turned into a short lane between the wooden houses that ended atop a steep slope bridged by two wide flights of timber steps in a pretty long and steep slant down to a real football field encircled by a wide cinder path.

Walking the flights, we descended to the large board-floor landing to both sides from which, there ran half-dozen bleachers made of lumber beams. No bleachers were seen on the field's opposite side but a lonely white hut and a tall picture-stand of 2 footballers motionless forever at the zenith in their high jump fixed at the moment of strenuous scramble in the air by their feet for the ball.

The girls of our class stayed back collecting the leaves from between the bleachers, but the boys bypassed the football field along the cinder path behind the goal on the right and fled down the dip to the river running nearby. When I reached the riverbank, three or four of the boys with their pants rolled up to the knees were already wading about the stream that noisily rushed thru the gap in the broken dam while the most of classmates stayed on the bank just watching.

Without a moment's deliberation, I pulled off my boots and socks and rolled the pants up. Entering the water was a little scary, what if it's too cold? But it turned out quite tolerable. The stream roared angrily and leaned in constant drive on my legs below the knees, yet the river

bottom felt pleasantly smooth and even. One of the boys who waded in the striving ripples next to me shouted thru the gurgling growl that it was a slab from the destroyed dam—wow! so classy!.

And so I waded hither-thither, wary of drenching the upturned pants when everything—the splashes of the running river, the eager yells of classmates, and the clear soft day—all at once vanished. Instead, on all sides, there was a completely different, silent, world filled with nothing but oppressive yellowish dusk and trickles of pallid bubbles waltzing up before my eyes. Still not realizing what happened, I waved my hands, or rather they did it on their own accord, and soon I broke free to the surface full of blinding sun glare, and the rumble of rushing water that kept slapping my nose and cheeks with choking splashes, strangely distant cries "drowns!" through the water plugs in my ears. My hands flip-flapped at random in the stream until the fingers grabbed the end of someone's belt thrown from the edge of the slab so meanly cut-off under the water.

I was pulled out, helped to squeeze the water out of my clothes, and directed to a wide trail bypassing the whole stadium so as not to run into the School Pioneer Leader and peachy girls collecting fallen leaves for their autumn herbaria…

~ ~ ~

In a bird's-eye view, the school building, supposedly, looked like a wide angular "U" with the entrance in the center of the underbelly. The tiled with brown ceramic lobby split into 2 corridors of parquet flooring of slippery glint which led to the opposite wings in the building, to those horns of the "U" from the bird's viewpoint.

Along one wall in each of the corridors, there ran a row of wide windows looking into the wild-never-trodden space in between the horns, filled by a jumbled thicket of young Pines with thin sloughing off bark. The wall opposite the windows had only doors set far apart from each other, marked by numbers and letters of the grades studying behind them.

The same layout continued after the turn into the left wing, yet in the right one, there was the school gymnasium taking up the whole width and height of the two-story building. The huge hall was equipped with a vault followed by the thick cable of spirally twined strands hanging from the hook in the ceiling and the parallel bars next to the pile of black mats by the distant blind wall. And near the entrance, there was a small stage hiding behind its dark-blue curtain an upright piano and a stock of triple seats stacked up there until needed for the gym transformation into the assembly hall.

The upper floor was climbed up the stair-flights starting at the turn of the left corridor into the horn-wing, and the layout up there replicated that of the first floor, except for the lobby, of course, with its nickel-plated stand-hangers for school kids' hats and coats behind low barriers, each with its own wicket, on both sides from the entrance door. That's why the second-floor corridors ran straight and smooth between the wide windows in one wall and the doors of classrooms in the other.

Attending school in felt boots, you could take a spurt of run and skid along the slick parquet flooring, if only there were not black rubber galoshes on your boots neither a teacher in the corridor. My felt boots, at first, savagely chafed my legs behind the knees, then Dad slashed them a little with his shoemaker's knife. He knew how to do anything.

In winter you came to school still in the dark. Sometimes I wandered around empty classrooms. In the seventh grade's room, I peeked inside the small white bust of Comrade Kirov on the windowsill. It looked much like the insides of the porcelain puppy statuette in the parents' room, only dustier.

Another time, switching on the light in the eighth grade, I saw a wax apple left behind on the teacher's desk. Of course, I fully realized that it was not natural, yet the fruit looked so inviting, juicy, and as if glowing with some inner light that all that made me bite the hard unyielding wax, leaving dents from my teeth on its tasteless side. Immediately, I felt ashamed of being hooked by a bright fake. Yet, who saw it? Quietly turned I the light off and sneaked out into the corridor.

> (…twenty-five years later, in the school of the Karabakh village of Noragyuogh, I saw exactly the same wax imitation, with the imprint of a child's bite and smiled knowingly – I saw you, kid!..)

Kids of all nations and ages are much alike, take, for instance, their love for Hide-and-seek… That game we played not only in the Courtyard but at home as well, after all, we were a company of 3, at times more numerous, when added by the neighbor children—the Zimins and the Savkins who lived at the same landing.

Our apartment was not abundant in hiding places. Well, firstly, under the parents' bed, or then... behind the cupboard corner... er... O, yes! – the cloth wardrobe in the hallway.

My Dad made it himself. A vertical two-meter-tall bar planted off the hallway corner (and 2 rod-branches from its top reaching the walls) cut out a sizable parallelepiped of space. Now, it just remained to hang a cloth curtain on ringlets running along the horizontal rods and cover the whole contraption with a piece of plywood so that the dust did not collect inside. The do-it-yourself cloakroom at ready! On the paint-coated wall inside the cotton-walled vault, there was fixed a wide board with pegs for hanging coats and other things, the big brown wicker chest stood on the floor beneath the hanger-board, and there still remained a lot of room for the footwear…

Granted, the hiding places were pretty scanty, yet playing the game was interesting all the same. You holed up in one of the enumerated spots and, keeping your breath under a tense control, listened to the "it's" cautious steps before... off you rushed! to win the run to the big sofa in the children's room from where the "it" started their search, and assert your being the first by taps on the big sofa's armrest and your loud yell, "knock-knock! that's for me!", so as not to be the "it" in the following round of Hide-and-seek.

Yet, one day Sasha managed to hide so successfully that I couldn't find him, he just disappeared! I even checked both the bathroom and the storeroom in the hallway, although we had a standing

agreement to never hide in there. And I felt thru each of the coats on the hanger-board behind the cloth curtain in the hallway.

Then I opened the wardrobe in the parents’ room with Mom’s dresses and Dad’s jackets hanging in the dark warm compartment behind the door that bore the big outside mirror. Just in case, I checked even behind the wardrobe’s right door though there was no room for hiding in the compartment filled with the drawers for stacks of sheets and pillowcases, except for the one at the bottom where I once discovered the blue square of a seaman collar cut off a sailor’s shirt. And, wrapped into it, there was a dagger of a naval officer with spiral ribs in the yellow hilt and the long steel body tapering to the needle-sharp point hidden in the taut black scabbard. A couple of days later, I couldn’t keep the temptation back and shared the great secret with the younger ones. However, Natasha casually shrugged the news away and answered that she knew about the dagger all along and even showed it to Sasha…

And now Natasha, with happy giggles, was following my vain search and after my frantic cry addressed to our absent brother that, okay, I agreed to be the “it” one more time, only let him go out from wherever he was now, Natasha also yelled instructing him to sit tight and quiet, and not to give up. I ran out of patience completely and refused to play anymore, but she suggested that I leave the room for a moment. Returning from the corridor, I saw Sasha in the middle of the room pleased and silent, and blinking bemusedly at Natasha’s report how he climbed the fourth drawer in the wardrobe where she piled socks over him…

At times there happened exclusively family games at home, with no neighbors taking part...

Merry laughter of several voices was heard from the parents' room, I put the book aside got up from the big sofa and trotted over there.

"What’s the fuss?" asked I envious of the mutual mirth.

"Checking the pots!"

"How’s that?"

"Come on and have a check!"

I was told to sit on Dad's back and grab him by the neck while he was firmly holding my legs. So far, so good, I liked it. But then he turned my back towards Mom and I felt her finger rooting my ass as deep as the pants let go.

"This pot is leaky!" announced Mom.

Everyone laughed and me too, although I felt somehow ashamed...

Another time Dad asks me, "Wanna see Moscow?"

"Wow! Sure!"

Coming from behind, he puts his hands over my ears, tight, and lifts me up above the floor by my head squeezed in between his hands.

"How now? D'you, see Moscow?"

"Yes! Yes!" scream I.

He puts me back where taken and I do my best not to hide the tears from the smarting pain in my ears flattened against the skull.

"Aha! Got fooled! It's so easy to fool you!"

> (...much later I figured out that he just was repeating the practical jokes played on him in his childhood...)

In the course of the Hide-and-seek with Sasha's disappearance, when checking the cloth wardrobe in the hallway, I noticed a bottle of lemonade stuck all by itself in the narrow cleft between the wall and the wicker chest. Lemonade then was something I adored in earnest, that carbonated nectar had only one annoying feature— it disappeared so too fast from my glass. As for the discovered bottle, it obviously was stored for some holiday and then just forgotten about.

I did not care to remind of it to anyone and the following day, or maybe the day after the following day, taking the opportunity of being home alone, I pulled the lemonade from behind the chest and hurried to the kitchen. Still in the corridor, my impatient fingers felt some slackness in the bottle cap, I tore it off and clapped the bottle up to my eager lips... Half-way through the second gulp, I realized that the lemonade was not somehow not quite it, but quite not it at all. Reversing the bottle to the normal position, I saw that after the holiday it was filled with sunflower oil for storage.

It's good that no one witnessed my attempt at drinking sunflower oil, except for the small white box with a red cross on its door, the hoard of first-aid kits, unknown pills and dark glass phials, fixed up in the wall between the cloth wardrobe and the door to the storeroom, and also the black electric meter just above the entrance door. But they were not to tell anyone…

My next gastronomical misconduct was filching of a bun freshly baked, which Mom took out from the electric oven "Kharkov" together with a bunch of others and spread them on a towel over the kitchen table.

The round brownish backs gleamed so tempting that I violated Mom's order to let them cool off little bit before the all-out tea party. Sneaking into the empty kitchen, I yanked one of them off, hid behind my back, and smuggled it into the lair on the wicker chest in the ill-illuminated cloth cave.

Probably, that bun was really too hot or else the sense of guilt culled taste sensations but, hastily chomping the forbidden fruit of culinary art, I didn't feel the customary pleasure and wanted

only the unpalatable bun to be over, the sooner the better. When from the kitchen Mom called all to come over and enjoy the tea with buns, I did not feel like that at all…

Yet in general, though a skill-less slow-goer, I was a fairly law-abiding child ever diligent-in-earnest, and if something went wrong it was not on purpose but because it simply turned out that way.

Dad grumbled that my Sloth-Mommy got born a moment before me and all I was good at was basking on the big sofa all day long gripping a book, like, a true copy of Oblomov!. But Mom protested that reading was beneficial and because of it I might become a doctor and look so very elegant in the white smock.

I did not want to become a doctor, I never liked the smell in doctors' offices…

~ ~ ~

At school, Seraphima Sergeevna showed us a plywood frame 10 cm x 10 cm, like, a prototype of a loom with two rows of small nails on two opposite sides. A thick wool thread, stretched between the nails on different sides, served the warp. Motley other threads interwoven across the warp formed rainbow streaks in a miniature rug. Our home assignment was to make a similar frame and bring it for the next lesson, the parents would certainly help us in manufacturing the tool, the teacher said.

However, Dad was not home, he worked the second shift that week, and Mom was busy in the kitchen. Yet, she helped with finding a piece of plywood from an old parcel-box and she allowed taking the saw from the storeroom in the hallway.

I worked in the bathroom pinning the workpiece with my foot to the stool. The saw got stuck so too often, and it kept tearing out small chips and scraps from the plywood, but after long tedious labor efforts a crooked, zigzag sided, square was sawed off.

Putting the tool aside, I got aware of the major problem – how could you ever cut out a smaller square inside the readied one so as to turn it into a frame?

I tried to hack out the square hole within the readied plywood square by use of a kitchen knife and a hammer, but only split the piece cut off with so many 'a hem!' in the intense exertion. By the time when I had to go to bed, all of the plywood supply was spoiled in fruitless attempts, and I realized that I was not fit to be a master. The disappointment was so bitter that I raised a mournful howling in the kitchen before Mom.

Lying in the folding bed, I tried not to fall asleep but stay awake till Dad was home after work and ask for his help. However, I overslept his coming, though at some point through overpowering drowsiness I did hear Dad's voice in the kitchen, giving Mom an angry reply, "What? Again "Kolya"? I know I'm "Kolya" so what?" And I fell back asleep.

In the morning at breakfast, Mom said, "Look at what Dad has made for you to take to school."

It was a flood of happiness and admiration, when I saw the plywood loom-frame finished with neither a split nor a chip, nor a crack anywhere, and smoothed with sandpaper. The rows of small nails along two opposite sides were aligned straighter than a ruler…

In a year Dad brought home from his work a jigsaw for me, and I enrolled in the group "Skillful Hands" at school. It did not go well with my jigsawing though, because the thin blades kept breaking all too often. Still, I managed to produce a fanciful frame of plywood (with Dad's help and polishing) for Mom's photo.

Doing pyrography in pieces of plywood was much easier and I liked the smell of charring wood. Dad brought home a scorcher that he had constructed at his work, and I produced a couple of illustrations to Krylov's fables copying them from *The Book for Future Craftsmen*.

However, all that does not mean that my childhood was spent with only handmade playthings around. No, I had a big, store-purchased, Modeling Designer Kit.

It was a cardboard box containing in its separate sections sets of black tin strips and panels full of perforated holes for threading them with small bolts and nuts to assemble building blocks for the construction of different things, like, a car, a locomotive, a windmill, a you-call-it from the booklet of blue-prints that supplemented the Modeling Designer Kit. For instance, it took a couple of months to accomplish a tower crane, taller than a stool it was, and almost all the bolts and nuts in the Kit were used up for it. I would finish the project sooner if not for Sasha's unwelcome insistence on his partaking in the construction efforts…

The costume of Robot for the New Year matinée about the Christmas Tree in the school gym was made by Dad. Mom found its design in The Working Woman *magazine*, which also was every month dropped into the mailbox on our entrance door.

When finished, the costume looked like a box of a thin but sturdy one-layer cardboard. Two holes in the box's sides were used for keeping your arms outside and the whole construction, when put over the shoulders, reached down to the crotch. The brown cardboard body of Robot was decorated with "+" and "–" on the chest, left to right, same way as markings in flat batteries for flashlight.

Inside the box, there also was a battery but more powerful, the Czech "Crown", and a small switch. Clicking that secret switch turned on and off the light-bulb nose in the other, smaller, box which served the Robot's head and fully covered my head, like a knight's helmet. The two square eyes cut on each side from the nose-bulb in the Robot's face allowed for seeing from within the box how and who with you were walking about the Christmas Tree…

~ ~ ~

Taming coy hope, I asked at the Detachment's Library if they'd allow me to choose not from the books returned into the stacks on the librarian's desk, but rather from those on the shelves. Yes, they said I could do that, yes. O, what an unbound joy beyond description I had to modestly keep in check!.

To the right from the librarian's desk, towered the wall of *The Complete Collection of Works by V. I. Lenin*, the shelves started near the floor and rose in tiers to the ceiling, bearing dense unified ranks of volumes different only with the hue of blue in their covers, which depended on the year of edition—the earlier, the darker.

Multi-volume rows of works by Marx and Engels in brown bindings paneled the wall opposite to that of blue, and the shelves of Stalin's writings, fewer but in taller volumes, screened the shorter wall by the door.

Dense lines of weighty, never opened books with embossed golden letters and numbers in their spines, enshrining countless lines between their heavy covers with the authors' convex relief portraits on the lid-like front ones...

However, there was a narrow cleft in the blue wall—the passage to that part of the Detachment's Library where, forming a maze of narrow passages, stood shelves with the books of varying degree of wear. The books by Russian writers ranked alphabetically—Aseev, Belyaev, Bubentsoff…; the authors from abroad kept to the same order under inscriptions of their countries' names—American literature, Belgian literature…; or under the branch they belonged to—Economics, Geography, Politics…

In the maze's nooks, you could also come across multi-volume collections: Jack London, Fennimore Cooper, Walter Scott (for all my persistent searches I never found among his works a novel about Robin Hood, but only about Rob Roy).

I loved wandering in the condensed silence of the passages between the shelves, taking, now and then, from as far above as allowed my height, one or another book to consider the title and put it back. In the end, pressing the chosen couple to my chest, I returned to the librarian's desk. Sometimes she put aside one of the books I brought, saying it was too early for me to read…

Once, meandering thru the treasury labyrinth, I suddenly farted. What an embarrassment! Though the sound was not very loud, yet, in case it reached the librarian's desk thru the wall of Marxism-Leninism classic writers, I tried to iron the wrinkles out by issuing pensive blurblabs that distantly resembled the pesky escaped noise, but now it sounded more like innocent fancy of a boy promenading in the narrow stack passages, for whom reading of certain books was yet too early.

And so I diddled with my lip claps until one of the camouflaging farts turned out so successful, natural and rolling, that simply mortified me, if the first, unintentional, breaking of wind might have been missed, the counterfeit sounded too convincing.

> (….as your mother's mother would likely put it: "Kept fixing until mucked up." She liked to use Ukrainian bywords in her speech…)

After the New Year holidays, the stack of subscriptions they dropped in the mailbox on our door got thicker by the addition of *The Pioneer Pravda*. Of course, I still was only an Octoberist, but

at school they told us that we already had to subscribe to that newspaper and in any other way prepare ourselves to become pioneers in the future.

Handing me *The Pioneer Pravda*, Mom said, “Wow! They started to deliver a newspaper for you like for an adult.” I felt pleased with getting admitted to the world of grown-ups, at least from the postal point of view. And I kept reading the newspaper all day long. Each and every line printed in its four pages.

When the parents returned from work in the evening, I met them in the hallway to proudly report that I had read all, all, all of it!. They said, “Good job!”, then hung their coats behind the cotton curtain in the corner, and went over to the kitchen.

You can’t help feeling disappointment when paid for all your pains with a polite disinterested indifference. Like, a hero after a life-and-death battle with Gorynich the Dragon to free a beautiful captive is nodded off with her fleeting “Good job!” instead of the regular kiss on the sugar-sweet mouth. Next time he would think twice if the scrap was worth the while, after all.

Thus, never again I read *The Pioneer Pravda* entirely—from its red title, with the statement of the printed organ affiliation, down to (and including too) the editorial office telephone numbers and street address in the city of Moscow…

The omission of desired and deserved reward incites to the restoration of justice. And the following morning I readily forgot Mom’s instruction that 3 spoonfuls of sugar were absolutely enough for 1 cup of tea. At that moment, I was alone in the kitchen and, while adding sugar to my tea, I got distracted by considering the frost patterns in the kitchen windowpane, which was the reason why the count of the added spoonfuls was started not with the first one. That mistake somehow coincided with a slight negligence and instead of a teaspoon, I loaded sugar with a tablespoon... The resulting cloy treacle was good only for pouring it into the sink. And that became another lesson to me – filched pleasures are not as sweet as might have been expected…

The fact of having read an issue of *The Pioneer Pravda* so exhaustively inflated my self-confidence and at the next visit to the Detachment’s Library, from the shelf of French literature, I grabbed a weighty volume with a bouquet of swords in its cover, *The Three Musketeers* by Dumas-peré. The librarian, after a moment’s hesitation, registered the book in my reader-card and I proudly carried the bulky booty home.

The big sofa somehow didn’t seem appropriate for reading such an adult book, so I took it to the kitchen and spread open on the oil-clothed tabletop. The very first page, full of footnotes informing who was who in France of the XVII century, felt like pretty complicated stuff for reading. But it gradually got in the groove and by the scene of D’Artangan’s saying goodbye to his parents, I already figured out by myself the meaning of the abbreviated words “Mr.” and “Mrs.”, which were absolutely absent from *The Pioneer Pravda*…

Later that winter, Mom decided that I needed to get my squint corrected because it was not right to leave it as it was. Before she said so, I had never suspected I had anything of the sort.

She took me to the oculist at the Detachment's Hospital, and he peeked into my eyes thru the narrow hole in the dazzling mirror circle that he wore raised to his white cap when not used. Then the nurse dropped some chilly drops into my eyes and told me to come next time alone because I was a big boy already and had just learned the way to their office.

Going home after the next visit, I suddenly lost the sharpness of vision—the light of bulbs on lampposts along the empty winter road turned into blurred yellow splotches and at home, when I opened a book, all the lines on the page were just unreadable dimmed strings. I got scared but Mom said it was okay only I had to wear glasses, so for a couple of following years I used some plastic-rimmed gear.

> (…my eyes were straightened and made keep parallel when looking, however, the eyesight in the left one stayed unfocused. At checks by oculists, I cannot see their pointer or finger touching the check chart. Yet, as it turned out, you can live your life with just one working eye.
>
> The squint was got rid of but ever since the expression in my eyes doesn't match, which is easily noticeable in a photo when screening them in turn—the inquiring curiosity in the right eye gives way to a lifeless indifference of the left one.
>
> At times I notice that same discrepancy in close-ups of some movie actors and I think to myself if they have also been treated for a squint, or possibly we all are being spied on by some unknown aliens thru our sinister eyes…)

~ ~ ~

And again came the summer but no volleyball was played anymore. In the volleyball grounds at the foot of the Bugorok-Knoll, they cemented two big squares for playing the game of *gorodki*. And they even organized a championship there. For two days the tin-clad wooden bats clapped and whipped against the concrete, sweeping the wooden pins of *gorodki* out the squares towards the barrier of the Bugorok-Knoll bluff side.

As usual, the news reached the big sofa with a snail delay, yet I still was in time for watching the final single combat of the two masters who could, even from the remote position, knock out the most complicated figure in *gorodki*—"the letter"—with just 3 throws of their bats and didn't spend more than 1 bat at such figures as "the cannon" or "Anna-girl-at-the-window".

The tournament was over, leaving behind the concrete squares where we, children, continued the game with fragments of the tin-cuffed bats and chips of the split *gorodki* pins. And even when the leftovers wore out of existence and the concrete squares got lost in the tall grass, the level grounds by the Bugorok-Knoll remained our favorite meeting place. If going out to the Courtyard you could see no one to play with, the next move was going over to the Bugork-Knoll to find your playmates there…

Besides playing games, we educated each other in the main things to know about the wide world around us. Like, after a nasty fall apply the underbelly of Cart Track to the bleeding scratch on your knee or elbow. And the stalks of Soldier-grass with tiny scale-like leaves were edible, as well as the sorrel but not the “horse sorrel”, of course. Or, say, those long-leaved swamp weeds were also edible when you peeled the green leaves off and got to the white core. Here you are! Just chew, you’ll see yourself!

We learned how to see flint from other stones and which of the rest to use for striking against the flint to send forth a trickle of pale sparks. Yes, the hard and smooth flint and the murky yellowish stone give out profuse sparks leaving some strange—both foul and fetching—smell of seared chicken skin.

Thus, in games and chat, we learned the world and ourselves…

“Are you in for Hide-and-seek?”

“No go. Two are too few for it.”

“There are two more. Coming back from the swamp in a minute.”

“Went to the swamp? What for?”

“Wanking.”

Soon the promised two came from the swamp, chortling between them, each one clutching a whisker of grass in his grab. I couldn’t guess the purpose of the grass bunches, neither had I any clear idea what “wanking” was about. Though from the grunts by which boys usually accompanied the word, I saw that it was something bad and wrong.

> (…all my life I have been a champion for righteousness. Everything should be as right as rain. Seeing something which is not right just puts my back up. If, say, a grown-up shoat with brazen squeals sucks on a cow’s udder, I’m tempted to disperse them.
>
> And take a look at that cow too! So resigned and obedient! As if she doesn’t know that milk is for calves and people only…)

That’s why I stood akimbo and met the comers with the reprimand in question form: “So what? Enjoyed your wanking?”

And then I learned that the righteousness supporters sometimes would better keep mum. Besides, it’s a crying shame that I could so easily be stretched on the ground at an unexpected brush….

Football was played in the grassy field between the Bugorok-Knoll and the garbage bins enclosure. Team captains nomination was based on who’s older, taller, and shriller in their shrieks at bickering.

Then the boys, in pairs, went aside and put heads together, “You’re ‘hammer’ and I’m ‘tiger’, okay?”

“No! No! I’m ‘rocket’, you’re ‘tiger’.”

Having agreed on the placeholder handles, they returned to the captains-to-be and asked the one whose turn it was to choose, “Which one for your team: ‘Rocket’ or ‘Tiger’?”

With the human resources divided, the game began. How I wanted to be a captain! To be so popular that all the boys would hanker to play in my team! But the dream remained just a dream… I zealously scrambled thru the grass: from one football goal to the other. I was desperate to win and didn’t spare myself, ready to do anything for our victory. It’s only that I never could get near the ball. At times it did roll towards me, yet before I got prepared to kick it properly, the swarm of “ours” and “theirs” came racing around and send it far afield… And again I plodded in a clumsy trot, back and forth, and shrieked, “Pass! Me here!” but no one listened to me and everyone else screamed too and was also running after the ball, and the game rolled on without my actual participation…

~ ~ ~

In summer all our family, except for Grandma Martha, went to Konotop in the Sumy region of Ukraine, to the wedding of Mom’s sister Lyoudmilla and the region champion of weightlifting in the third weight class, young, but rapidly balding, Anatoly Arkhipenko from the city of Sumy.

A truck with a canvas top took us thru Checkpoint—the white gate in the barbed-wire fence surrounding the whole Zona—to the Valdai railway station where we boarded a local train to the Bologoye station to change trains there. The car was empty with no one but us on the wooden yellow benches paired back-to-back on both sides of the aisle. I liked the car swaying in time with the clatter of wheels on rail joints beneath the floor. And I liked to watch the dark log posts flicking across the windowpane, their crossbars loaded with the endless stream of wires sliding to the bottom in their sag only to go up to the next post’s leap-flick for the unrolling stream to slide into the next sag and tilting up, and again, and again, and... At the stops, the local train patiently waited to give way to more important trains and moved on only after their impetuous whoosh by.

One especially long wait happened at the station of Dno whose name I read in the glazed sign on the green timber-wall of its shed. And only after a solitary steam engine puff-puffed past the shed, slowly piercing with its long black body the white curls of its own steam, our train started on.

> (…I recollected that station and the black glitter of the engine penetrating the milky mist of the steam when I read that at the station of Dno, Colonel of the Russian Army Nikolay Romanov signed his renunciation of the royal throne… However, by that act, he didn’t save himself nor his wife, nor the children of their royal family all lined up with their backs to the basement wall and shot at and then those not killed by the volley were finished off with the rifle bayonets.

I knew nothing of all that when sitting there in the local train by the shabby shed. Neither was I aware that it does not matter if I knew it or not. Either way, all that is part of me. It's me at both ends of those Mosin rifles ridiculously long even when with no bayonets…

Still, it's good that we don't know all in childhood…)

Most of the houses along Nezhyn Street in the city of Konotop kept slightly off the road, standing behind their respective fences which reflected the owner's level of prosperity, as well as the mainstream trends, brands, and stages in the evolution of the local fencing technologies. However, the left-side continuity of sundry fencing stretches in the street was briefly interrupted by the wall of Number 19 whitewashed ages ago, having 2 windows in bleached peeling-off paint-coat equipped by 4 hinged deal shutters to seal the windows off for the night.

To enter the house, one should have passed thru the wicket of tall weather-worn boards, side by side with the wider, yet constantly closed gate which separated the yard from the street. The comer should also know which of the 4 entrances they needed. The doors were identically distributed between two windowless verandas abutting the house in between the 4 windows looking in the yard.

The veranda next to the wicket, with both of its doors, as well as the half of the whole house, belonged then to Ignat Pilluta and his wife Pillutikha, therefore the pair of windows overlooking Nezhyn Street were theirs. The timber walls of the second veranda wore a coat of rambling Vine with wide green leaves and pale clusters of dinky, never ripening, berries; the blind partition, also of boards, divided the second veranda's inside into 2 lengthwise sections, 1 for each of the 2 remaining owners.

The home, aka *khutta*, of our grandmother, Katerinna Ivanovna, comprised the half-dark veranda-hallway, the kitchen with a window viewing the 2 stairs beneath the outside entrance door to the veranda, and the brick stove in the opposite corner next to which stood the leaf of the constantly open door to the only room in the *khutta*. The space between the whitewashed walls there all day long remained submerged in the perpetual limbo-like dusk oozing in thru the room's window from the solid shade under the giant Elm in the two-meter wide backyard, who also shadowed half of the neighboring yard of the Turkovs at Number 17.

Turning round the farthermost corner in the second veranda, you reached the last, fourth, door belonging to the *khutta* of old man Duzenko and his wife. They also had the same-sized sequence of hallway-kitchen-room, yet by 2 windows more than in Grandma Katya's *khutta* because of the symmetry in layout—the 2 windows viewing the street called for 2 windows looking into the common yard.

2 mighty American Maples with pointed fingertips in their open-palm leaves grew in the yard right next to each of the Duzenko's additional window. The wide gap between the tree trunks was filled by a squat stack of red bricks, brittle with their age, which old man Duzenko kept all his life for a possible reconstruction of his *khutta* in some future time.

About six meters away from the breastwork between the Maples and parallel to it, there stretched a long shed of ancient dark gray boards, whose blind wall had blind doors secured by sizable one-eyed padlocks. Their respective owners kept there fuel for the winter, and in an enclosure within Grandma Katya's fuel section lived a pig named Masha.

Opposite the veranda in the barren Vine coat, one more huge Elm and a timber-fence separated the common yard from the neighbors at Number 21. Next to the Elm, there stood a small shed plastered with the mixture of clay, cow dung, and chopped straw, which also was padlocked to secure the earth-cellar of the Pillutas inside it. The Duzenkos' earth-cellar shed of bare boards stood farther away from the street and as if continued the long common shed, being separated from it by the passage to the kitchen gardens.

Between those two earth-cellar sheds, there stood a small lean-to structure covering the lid over Grandma Katya's earth-cellar—a vertical shaft two-plus-meter deep, with a wooden ladder going down, into the dark between the narrow earth walls. At the bottom, the flashlight disclosed 4 niches caved in on all four sides and slightly deeper than the shaft bottom under ladder legs. That's where they stored potatoes and carrots for the winter, and beets too because the frost couldn't reach the stored vegetables at such depth.

In the corner formed by the Duzenko's and Grandma Katya's earth-cellar sheds, there stood a kennel of the black-and-white dog Zhoolka chained to his house. He tinkled the long chain, whipped and lashed it against the ground, barking furiously at any stranger who entered the yard. But I made friends with him on the very first night when, by Mom's prompt, I took out and dumped into his iron plate the leftovers after supper….

Grandma Katya's hair was sooner white than gray and a little wavy. She had it cut to the middle of her neck and held in place with a curved plastic comb beneath the back of her head. The whiteness of the hair contrasted to the swarthy skin in her face with a thin nose and somewhat rounded, as if frightened, eyes. But in the somber room behind the kitchen, on one of the three blind walls, there hung a photographic portrait of a black-haired woman with an aristocratically high hairdo and a necktie (as was the fashion once upon the New Economic Policy times during the late twenties)—Grandma Katya in her young years.

Next to her, there was an equally large photo of a man with a heavy Jack London's chin, wearing a Russian collar shirt and black jacket, so looked her husband Joseph when in the position of the Regional Trade Auditor before his arrest and exile to the North, and abrupt disappearance strangely coincident with the retreat of German troops from Konotop…

On the whole, I liked the visit to Grandma Katya, although there were neither *gorodki* nor football playing, and only daily Hide-and-seek with the children from the neighboring *khuttas* who would never find you if you hid in Zhoolka's kennel.

Late in the evening, on the log electric-line pillars along the street, there lit up rare yellowish bulbs, unable to disperse the night dark even on the ground beneath them. May beetles flew with a bomber buzz above the soft black dust in the road, yet so low that you could knock them down with your jacket or a leafy branch broken off a Cherry tree hanging over from behind someone's

fence. The captives were incarcerated in empty matchboxes whose walls they scratched from inside with their long awkward legs. The following day, we opened their cells to admire the fan-like mustaches and the chestnut color of their glossy backs. We tried to feed them on freshly shredded blades of grass, but they did not seem hungry and we set them free from our palms the same way as you set a ladybug to fly. The beetle ticklishly crawled to a raised fingertip, tossed up his/her rigid forewings to straighten out their long transparent wings packed under that protective case, and flew off with low buzzing. Okay, fly wherever you want – in the evening we'll catch more….

One day from the far end of the street, there came a jumble of jarring wails split by rare prolonged booms. The sounds of familiar cacophony made the people of Nezhyn Street went out of their yards and, standing by their gates, inform each other whose funeral it was.

In front of the procession, 3 men were marching slowly, the lips pressed to the brass mouthpieces of trumpets in heartrending sobs. The fourth one carried a drum in front of him like a huge potbelly. After walking for as long as it was proper, he smote its side with a felted stick. The wide belt cinching the drum across the drummer's back left both his hands free to hold the felted stick in one of them and a wide copper plate in the other, which he from time to time crashed against the second such plate screwed upon the drum rim, to which event the trumpets responded with a new splash of disparate wailing.

After the musicians, they carried a large photo of a sullen man face and several wreaths with white-lettered inscriptions along black ribbons. A medium platform truck followed the wreaths, purring its engine. On the platform with the unfastened sides, there stood an openwork monument of rebar rods coated with silver paint. Two men grabbed onto the rods from both sides to keep their balance over the open coffin at their feet with the deceased laid on display. A hesitant nondescript crowd concluded the slow procession.

I did not dare to go out into the street, although Mom and Aunt Lyoudmilla were there standing at the gate as well as the neighbors with their children by the wickets of their khuttas. However, driven by curiosity, I still climbed the gate from inside to peek over it. The lead-colored nose stuck from the pallid dead face looked so horrible that I flew back to the kennel of black-and-white Zhoolka, who also was ill at ease and whining to back up the trumpets….

Grandma Katya knew the way of tying a usual handkerchief into a fatty mouse with ears and a tail, which she put onto her palm to pet the white head with a finger of her other hand. All of a sudden the mouse would leap in a desperate escape attempt, but Grandma Katya caught it on the fly, put back and went on petting, under our eager laughter. Of course, I realized that it was her who pushed the mouse, but following the trick, as closely as possible, I could never crack how she did that.

Each evening she hauled out the pail of sourly smelling slop with peelings, scraps, and offals to her section in the mutual shed, where pig Masha greeted her by upbeat impatient grunting. There Grandma Katya would stand over slurping Masha accusing her of one or other act of blatant misbehavior.

She showed us which of the vegetable beds and trees in the garden were hers so that we did not play around with the neighbors' because there was no fencing to split the plots. However, the apples were not ripe yet and I climbed the tree of White Mulberry, though Grandma Katya warned that I was too heavy for such a young tree. And indeed, one day it broke under me in two. I dreaded the pending punishment, but Dad did not beat me. He pressed the halves of the split tree back to each other wrapping tight with a length of some sheer yellowish cable. And Grandma Katya never said a scathing word.

That evening she shared that the pig refused to eat anything at all and knocked the pail over because the animal was too clever and felt that the next day they would slaughter her. In the morning, when the butcher came, Grandma Katya left her *khutta*, and only after that they pulled frantically screaming Masha out of her enclosure, chased about the yard and slaughtered with a long knife to pierce the pig's heart and her high-pitched squeal turned into wheezy snorts growing shorter and shorter. Throughout that time, Mom kept us, her children, in the *khutta*, and she allowed me to go out only when they were scorching the motionless it by the buzzing flame of blowtorch.

At Aunt Lyoudmilla's wedding, plates with sliced lard and fried cutlets, and dishes of chilled-out pork jelly cluttered the long table in the yard. One of the guests volunteered to teach the bride how to stuff a home-made sausage, but she refused and the merry guests laughed out loud….

In general, I liked Konotop although I felt sorry for Masha and ashamed of splitting the Mulberry tree. For some reason, I even found likable the taste of the cornbread. Everyone was cursing it but still buying because Nikita Khrushchev declared Corn the Queen of the fields and at shops they sold only bread made of cornflower…

Back to the Object we also were coming by train but the road seemed so much longer. I felt sick and dizzy until eventually there was found a window in the car where you could stick your head out into the wind. Clinging to that window, I watched as the green string of cars in our train, keeping a constant bent about its middle, rolled around the green field. It was easy to figure out that our journey became so endless because the train was describing one huge circle in one and the same field with random copses added here and there. At one of the stops, Dad left the car and did not come back at the departure. I was scared that we would remain without our Dad, and started to whine pitifully. But a few minutes later, he appeared along the car aisle, carrying ice-cream because of which he lingered on the platform and jumped into another car of the departing train…

~ ~ ~

That year my younger sister and brother also went to school and at the end of August, Dad, angrily red-faced, was taking Grandma Martha to the station of Bologoye to help her change trains to Ryazan.

When saying "goodbye", she sobbed a little until Dad snarled: "Again? Started again!."

Then she kissed all of us, her grandkids, and was gone from my life…

Across the road opposite the corner buildings of our Block, there was a grocery store and, after Grandma Martha had left, Mom was sending me there for small purchases, like, bread, matches, salt or vegetable oil. More important products she bought herself—meat, potatoes, sore cream or chocolate butter. For holiday celebrations, large-beaded red or smaller-beaded black caviar was also bought because the Object was well catered for. And only ice-cream appeared at the store no sooner than once a month and was immediately sold out. As for the tasty cornbread, I never saw it on sale there.

To the right from the store, near the bend in the road around the blocks, the wall of the forest was slightly cleft by a narrow glade, where the car repair ramp constructed of sturdy logs provided another gathering place for children to play.

"To the ramp!" called a familiar boy running by. "They've caught a hedgehog there!"

All the hedgehogs seen by me up to that moment were only met in the pictures, so I also hurried to the scream-and-shouting group of boys. With the sticks in their hands, they checked the animal's attempts at fleeing to the forest, and when the hedgehog turned into a defensive ball of gray-brown needles, they rolled it pushing with the same sticks into a small brook. In the water, the hedgehog unfolded, stuck his sharp muzzle with the black blob of the nose out from under the needles, and tried to escape thru the grass on his short crooked legs. Yet, he was spread on the ground and firmly pressed across his belly with a stick to prevent his folding up again.

"Look!" shouted one of the boys. "He's constipated! Cannot shit!" To prove the statement, the boy poked a stalk of some rank grass into a dark bulge between the animal's hind legs.

"The turd is too hard. He needs help."

I recollected how Grandma Martha saved me.

Someone in the company had pliers in his pocket, the patient was crucified on the earth with a couple of additional sticks and the self-proclaimed vet pulled the jammed turd with the pliers. The turd, however, did not end and turned out having a strange bluish-white color.

"Damn fool! You tore his guts out!" cried another boy.

The hedgehog was set free and once again made for the forest dragging behind the pulled out part of the intestine. All followed to see the outcome.

I didn't want any more of all that and, fortunately, my sister came to the rescue running from the Block to say that Mom was calling me. Without the slightest delay, I left the party of boys and hurried after her to the Courtyard. There I talked to Mom, greeted neighbors, ran some errand and all the time was thinking one and the same thought formulated in an oddly crisp, not childish way, "How to live on now, after what I've just seen? How to live on?"

> (…but still and all, I survived. The blessing property of human memory, its aptitude to fade recorded by Vladimir Dahl in his dictionary, saved me.

Yet, in the series of atrocities registered by me, for the most part human beings torturing their likes into deformed pieces of tattered meat, the mutilated hedgehog comes the first, dragging thru the brittle grass the grayish length of the intestine with small pieces of dry earth stuck to it.

And I still lived on to understand that low brutes need lofty excuses for their barbarity: …to alleviate sufferings…as sacred revenge…to keep the race pristine…

But again, to be entirely frank: is there any guarantee that I myself would never and under no circumstances do anything of the kind? I can't tell for sure…)

When you are a child, there is no time to look behind at all those series back in your memory. You have to go on—farther and beyond—to new discoveries. If only you've got the nerve to keep the course.

Once, slightly veering to the left from the accustomed "school—home" route, I went deeper into the broad-leaf part of the forest to come, on a gently rising hillock, across 4 tall Pine trees that grew a couple of meters apart from each other, in the corners of an almost regular square. The smooth wide columns of their trunks without branches nearer to the ground went upwards and at the height of six to seven meters were bridged by a platform you could reach climbing up the crossbeams cut of thick boughs and nailed to one of the trees, like rungs in a vertical ladder … I never found out the purpose of the contraption, nor who it was made by. All I learned was it's not a fraidy-cat to climb a platform in the forest even if discovered by himself…

Much easier went on the exploration of the basement world. I was going down there together with Dad to fetch the firewood for Titan the Boiler who heated the water for bathing.

Because all the bulbs in the basement corridors were missing, Dad brought along the flashlight with the spring lever protruding from its belly. When you squeezed the flashlight in your hand, the springy lever resisted yet yielded and went inside, you loosened the grip and it popped out again. A couple of such pumping rounds awoke a small dynamo-machine buzzing inside the handle to produce the current for the lamp as long as you kept pushing-loosing the lever, and the faster you did it, the brighter was your flashlight.

A circle of light hopped along the walls and cemented floor in the left corridor of the basement with our section at the very end of it. The walls in the narrow corridor were made of boards and so were the sections' doors locked with weighty padlocks.

Behind our door, there was a square room with two concrete walls and the timber partition from the neighboring section.

Dad unlocked the padlock and turned on the inside bulb whose crude light flooded the high stack of evenly sawed logs by the wall opposite the door, and all sorts of household things hanging from the walls or piled on shelves: the sled, the tools, the skies.

After a couple of plump logs were chopped with the ax, I collected the chips for kindling Titan the Boiler and a few thicker splinters, while Dad grabbed a whole armful of firewood.

Sometimes, he was tinkering at something or sawing in our basement section and I, bored with waiting, would go out in the corridor where a narrow grated ditch middle-lined the cemented floor. Thru the open door, the bulb threw a clear rectangle of light on the opposite section wall while the far end of the corridor, from where we had come, was lost in the dark. But I was not afraid of anything because behind my back Dad was working in his old black sailor's pea jacket with two upright rows of copper buttons in its front each bearing a brave neatly embossed anchor….

~ ~ ~

The firewood got to the basement in early autumn. A slow-go truck would enter the Courtyard and dump a heap of ruffly halved bole chunks nearby the tin-clad lid of the cemented pit right in the center of every sidewall of the Block's houses. Inside one-and-a-half meter deep pit, slightly up from its bottom, there started a hole thru the foundation, 50 cm x 50 cm, which ended in the basement dark corridor at about a meter-and-half above the cemented floor. The chunks were dropped down into the pit, and thence, thru the hole, into the basement to be hauled into the section whose owner the firewood was brought for.

As I was a big boy already, Dad instructed me to throw the wood pieces into the pit so that he could drag them thru the hole down into the basement. Dropping them in, I could not see him, but heard his voice from down there when he shouted me to stop if the pile of chunks in the pit threatened to block the hole. Then I waited until there came muffled thuds of the pieces toppling onto the cemented floor in the basement corridor.

Everything went smooth and easy before Natasha told Sasha that they had brought the firewood for us and I was helping Dad to move the wood down there. Sasha came running to the heap of log chunks and started dragging them and dropping into the pit. To all my furious clarifications that he was violating the age limits for this particular job, and that the very next chunk he dropped would surely block the hole, he answered with silent but obstinate snuffling and just went on.

> (…any rhetoric is lost on those whose Stubbornness-Mommy was born a moment before them!.)

Yet, I not only made speeches but also kept throwing the wood, so that later, at midday meal in the kitchen, Sasha would not make hints that he did more than me. And suddenly he tottered back from the pit, his blood-smeared fingers clutching his face. Natasha rushed home to call Mom, who came running with a damp cloth to wipe the blood off Sasha's upturned face. Dad also raced from the basement and no one was listening to my defense that all that happened accidentally, not on purpose, when the piece of wood thrown by me scratched the skin on my brother's nose. Mom yelled at Dad because he allowed all that to happen. Dad also grew angry and told everyone to go home, and he'd finish the work himself.

The scratch healed very soon, although Sasha stubbornly peeled the patch off his nose even before the midday meal.

> (…I doubt if my brother would recollect the happening, it's only me who remembers and feels guilty: yes, it was not deliberate, but instead of futile orations I should have been more watchful tossing them chunks…)

At school, I regularly enrolled in this or that Group, whenever its tutor entered our classroom to recruit volunteers. Group meetings were held in the late afternoon so that participants had time to go home, have their midday meal, and come back to school. After a one-hour session of learning and training at the Group, its members returned home thru the complete night darkness...

One evening after the Group activities were over, a bunch of participants dropped into the school gym where there was an upright piano on the stage behind the closed curtain, and where one boy once showed me that if you hit only the black keys then it sounded like Chinese music. But that evening I forgot all about the music because besides the piano on the stage, there were several boys from senior grades who had a pair of real boxing gloves!

We dared to ask permission to touch the gloves' shiny leather and try them on. The senior graders kindly allowed us that, and then they had an idea of holding a match between the sprats, a fighter from the Gorka (that is someone from the blocks atop the hill) against someone of Lowlanders who dwelt in the rows of timber houses at the foot of the Gorka upland.

The choice fell on me—O! and I wanted it so dearly!—and so did red-haired fatty Vovka from among the Lowlanders. As the stage was illuminated too poorly for the match, all the present went over to the gym hallway under the bright bulb reflected in the ink-black winter darkness behind the wide window-pane, and they commanded "box!" to me and Vovka.

At first, we both chuckled punching each other with the bulky balls of gloves, but soon we grew hot and angry. I in earnest wanted to deal a good one in his head while in his eyes in that very head you unmistakably could read his craving to knock me down. Before long my left shoulder, which kept receiving all his blows, felt terribly sore, while my right hand, that kept hitting his shoulder, grew limp and floppy. Probably, his state was no better, our giggles turned into puffing and gasping. It was bad and unbearably painful because his blows, like, penetrated to the very bone of my forearm, but I would rather die than beat retreat. At last, the big boys got bored with such a monotony, they told us "enough!" and took away their gloves.

The next morning a purple-black bruise decorated my left forearm and for several following days I was very touchy at that spot, ducking even from a friendly pat and issuing the hiss of self-defending gander…

~ ~ ~

If the Courtyard was covered by powder snow but not too deep, all of our family went out to clean the carpet and the runner. We spread them face down on the snow and stomped on their

backs. Then the carpet was turned over, the snow from the snowdrifts about it got swept with a broom onto all of the carpet's face and then swept away. Done. And we folded the carpet.

The long green runner remained face down after the stomping, and the 4 of us—Mom and the 3 children—gathered upon it, and Dad dragged the runner over the snowdrifts with all of us standing upon its back, leaving a crumpled, dust-smeared, furrow thru the snow in our wake. Yes, our Dad was so strong and mighty!

And making use of a slushy snowfall, the boys began to roll up snow in the Courtyard forming huge balls to build a fortress. For a start, you made a regular snowball, put it down onto a snowdrift, and began rolling it back and forth. The lump immediately swelled with layers of slush snow stuck all over its sides. The snowball turned bigger than a football, then grew above your knees, becoming denser, heavier and you had to call for help already and, in a team of two or three, roll it to the fortress construction site where the big boys hoisted it and fixed into the course of dense snow lumps making the circular wall taller than you…

We split into two parties—the besieged defenders and the assaulting troops. In a record short time, the ammo of snowballs was hurriedly produced and – off to the storm they rushed!

Shrieks, yells, babel; snowballs whooshing from all the sides and in every direction. I stuck my head out above the fortress wall looking for someone to hit with my snowball but a crack of yellow lightning flashed in my eyes, like an exploding electric bulb. With my back sliding against the wall, down I crouched, my hands firmly pressed to the eye whipped with a snowball.

(…

" oh, I forgot, they killed me in the charge…"

so depicted such a moment Nikolai Gumilyov in his poem…)

Yet, the battle raged on, and no one cared about bodies of the fallen buddies. Everything fused and drowned in one united warcry, "A-a-a-a-a-ah!" After a period out of any time at all the battle was over. The fortress never surrendered but turned into a hillock of snow trampled firm and hard as ice. Yet, the roar still did not abated, with the same unrestrainable yell we kept sliding down the hillock on our bellies, the heads turned kinda hollow and filled with a sort of dull deafness because of your and others' crazy, unceasing, howl, "A-a-a-a-a-ah!"

My eye could see already. I slapped up a snowball and hit the head of a boy older than me. What a blunder! Firstly, the battle was long since ended and that boy had already come with his skates on. How could I be so reckless? As always, because of trying to keep things in proper order, to make everything right. Ages before, at the beginning of fortress construction, the eldest boys—seventh-and-eighth-graders—announced, "who does not build will not play", and I knew for sure that the boy in skates was not among the builders. But who now cared about the right things and justice? Many of the founder boys had left already. Those stuck behind had completely forgotten the pre-battle declaration.

Yet, there was no time to present justifications for the arrogant deed, and there was no one for listening to them or helping out, so – run for your life! And I plunged headlong towards the staircase-entrance door of our house. Maybe he wouldn't catch up with his skates on in the trampled snow drifts?

Running, exhausted by the countless hours in the wild game, I was still running. The entrance door's so nigh already! "But if he'll still catch up?" flashed in my mind, and I got a skate kick in the ass for such an inappropriate fear. Slamming the door I shot thru the vestibule where he dared not follow – it's someone else's house…

> (…if you want everything to work out as it should, you mustn't doubt that so it would…)

In the spring that followed, my parents tried their hand at farming. That is, they decided to plant potatoes... When with a spade and a bagful of potatoes they started for the forest after work, I begged to take me too.

We came to the narrow endless clearing in the forest, the former border of Zona before the expansion of the Object's area. Dad made holes in the soil which he turned the day before, and Mom dropped potatoes into them. Their faces looked sad and Dad wistfully shook his head asserting that the soil was not the right sort, mere loam on which nothing could possibly grow… Soon, the quiet spring twilight thickened, and we started home.

> (…a little anticipatory, I can say that the attempted kitchen garden indeed yielded nothing. Was the failure because of the loam, or the doubt annulled any possibility for a success?.
>
> And, what is really inconceivable, why was to start it at all? To save costs for potatoes? But we were not so poor then. In the parents' room there appeared a fold-out couch-bed, two armchairs with lacquered armrests of wood, and a three-legged coffee table, all of them making one furniture set.
>
> Probably, they simply wanted to take a break from all that furniture and the farming enterprise served an excuse for fleeing to the forest…)

~ ~ ~

And again it was summer only this time it started much earlier than in all the previous years. And together with that summer, the Rechka river rushed into my life. Or maybe, the limits of my living space had expanded enough to reach it.

To start the relations with the Rechka, at first, I needed a company of boys more advanced in their years who led along the downhill road avoiding the heat-softened tar in the joints, which leg I knew well though from my frequenting the Detachment's Library. Then forked an unknown footpath thru the shady thicket over a steep slope until there, all at once, unfurled the sparkling sunlit stream of the Rechka lapping among innumerable boulders of any size.

You could cross the ten-meter-wide river without getting deeper than to your waist or you might stand instead knee-deep in its fast current and watch a school of translucent whitebait poking ticklishly at your ankles in the greenish twilight of the incessantly rolling mass of water…

When out of the river, we played Key-or-lock, betting on the form of the splash made by a stone hurled into the water. If the splash rose up like a stick, that was counted "a key", while a wider, bush-like, splash went for "lock". In controversy cases, the last word remained by the boy who played football better, or whose pebble did more leaps at "baking pancakes" over the water surface… Soon I began to go to the Rechka alone or with just one partner, yet on the river bank we parted because our main concern was fishing.

All the tackle consisted of a fishing pole—a cut-down willow whip—with a length of line tied to the thinner end. The line was threaded thru the float and ended with the hook, accompanied by a tiny lead sinker. The float could be made of a brownish wine cork, a match stuck into the same hole by side the threaded line fixed its length from the hook, or you could use a float bought from the Sports Goods store—a plucked and pared goose feather painted red-and-white with 2 tiny rubber rings to keep it fixed on the line—they both popped equally well on the rushing ripples of rapid current, or turned thoughtfully still in a small backwater pockets behind the bigger boulders…

Fishing is something personal. One boy pins his hopes on that quiet inlet, the other prefers to have his float hopping on the rapids. That's why companions get parted on the river bank. Fishing is a rocket-fast surge of excitement at the slightest start of the float. Hush! Striking!. The line does not yield, it jibs, bends the pole end, cuts the water in zigzags, then suddenly gives up, jumps out and, in a fleeting arch over your head, carries to you the sparkling flutter of the caught fish! Then, of course, it turns to be not a fish but a small fry. Never mind! The next catch will be tha-a-at big!.

More often than anything else there was one of the "miserables" on the hook. I never learned their scientific name. Those fools got caught even on a bare hook, without any bait at all. And they could be hooked at any part of them—at the tail, or the belly, or an eye. Who would bother classifying such a moron minnow?

Back from fishing, I usually brought half-dozen of small fry sleeping in a milk-can, and Paulyna Zimin's cat devoured them with greedy purr-and-snap from a saucer tap-tapping at the landing tiles….

That day I started fishing from the bridge between the Pumping Station and Checkpoint on the road out from the Zona. As usual, I walked after the current, refreshing the bait, adjusting the depth of the hook immersion. Being a steadfast fisherman, I only once allowed myself get distracted from bobs and jerks of the float in the current. It happened on the sandy spit nearby the green bush, where I carried out some restoration work mending the sand sculpture of a woman stretched on her back.

The masterpiece was created a couple of days before by 2 soldiers. You could guess at a glance that they were soldiers because of their black underpants and black high boots. Who else would

wear such boots in summer?. So I increased the sagging breasts and slightly rounded the hips of the sculpture. They seemed wider than necessary but I did not correct it.

Why did I do it at all? Very clear, it's not right to let the work of art disappear in the rest of the sand with all the soldiers' labor gone to ashes…

> (…or was I hooked by the opportunity to spank a female bust and thighs even if just made of sand?
>
> Eew! To hell with Freud and other miserables from psychoanalytic schools!
>
> Let's go back fishing, it's much more fun…)

…and I did not roll on top of her like one of the soldiers two days before, but just returned to fishing.

The current carried the float to the broken dam below the stadium, where ages ago I stumbled off the insidious slab. The point marked half of the Rechka having been passed already and after the other half it would run beyond the Zona, away from the barbed wire over 2 parallel rows of poles, breaking out thru the strip of loosened ground in between the wire-walls for catching the footprints of NATO spies. Half of the walk along the river was over and the three-liter milk-can contained just a couple of "miserables". The neighbor's cat would be disappointed.

When down the stream there loomed the second (and also last) bridge in the Zona, I decided not to go any farther but try my luck at the sharp bend of the current under the precipitous drop-off in the bank. And right there happened that after what folks go fishing at all. The float did not twitch or flinch but went under the surface deep and slowly. I pulled back and the vibrating pole in my hands responded with the strangely unyielding resistance. No fish jumped from the water wiggling in its flight over the air. I had to pull the tight line all the way closer and closer and finally drag it onto the dry land… The fish twisted and arched and beat the sand, scaring me by its might and size, never had I seen the like of that dark blue piece of alive thick hose.

I threw the "miserables" back to the river, filled the can with water, and lowered the pray into it but the fish had to stand there upright—its length did not allow for tumbling in the can. 2 boys came from the bridge, they had already finished fishing and were on their way home. They asked me about the catch and I showed them the fish. "Burbot!" without a sec of hesitation identified one of them.

When they left, I realized that I couldn't catch anything better, that it was time to cut the line and go home… I walked ascending the Gorka and the glory ran before me—a couple of boys jogged for a couple of hundred meters to meet before the Block. They wanted to take a look at The Burbot. And when I was already nearing our house, an unfamiliar auntie from the corner building stopped me on the walk to ask if that was true.

She peeped into the can at the round muzzle of The Burbot turned asleep by that time, and asked me to give it to her. I immediately handed the milk-can over and waited while she carried the

fish to her home and brought the can back, because it's only right to do what you're told by grow-ups….

~ ~ ~

In those years, a year was much longer than nowadays and it was packed with bigger number of memorable events. For instance, in the same summer with The Burbot my sister, and brother, and I went to the pioneer camp, though we were not young pioneers yet.

One sunny morning the children from our Block, and from the twin one, and the Lowlander-children from the wooden houses by the foot of the Gorka upland collected at the House of Officers where two buses and two trucks with canvas tops were waiting for us. Parents gave their respective children suitcases with clothes, and bags full of sweets and other tasty things, and waved after the departing convoy.

We went over the bridge at the Pumping Station and passed the white gate of Checkpoint, leaving the Object behind the barbed wire that surrounded all of it together with the forest, hills, marshes and a stretch of the Rechka.

After Checkpoint, we turned to the right, climbing a protracted slant of the highway which we followed for about half an hour before another turn to the right to follow a dirt road in the forest of great Pine trees. There, the convoy had to slow down and, after a twenty-minute ride, we drove up to another gate in another fence of barbed wire. However, that fence wasn't doubled, and there were no sentries at the gate because it was a pioneer camp.

Not far from the gate, there stood a one-story building with the canteen and the rooms for caretakers, and paramedic, and Camp Director, and other employees at the camp. Behind that building, there stretched a wide field marked by a tall iron mast of "giant leaps" crowned with the iron wheel from which there hung half-dozen canvas loops on thoroughly rusted chains because no one ever used the attraction. Beneath the row of tall Birch trees along the left edge of the field, there ran a neat cinder path to the pit for broad jumps. Across the field, the forest began again, parted from the camp by the couple lines of barbed wire nailed randomly to thicker trunks among the trees.

To the left of the canteen building, a growth of green bushes screened 4 square canvas tents with 4 beds each on the lining-board floor for the ninth-graders from the first platoon.

Then followed a level clearing with another iron mast, this time more slender and without chains but with one thin cable looped trough two small pulleys—atop the mast and near the ground—for the Red Flag of the camp. Each morning and each evening the platoons were lined-up along three sides of a large rectangular, facing inside. The iron mast, Camp Director, Senior Pioneer Leader, and the camp accordionist concluded the rectangular as the fourth—fairly rarefied—side of the perimeter. The commanders of the platoons, starting with the youngest, approached, in turn, Senior Pioneer Leader to report that their platoon was lined-up. During their report, both the commanders and Senior Pioneer Leader held their right elbows up, hands straightened and kept diagonally across their respective faces.

With the reports received from the commanders of all lined-up platoons, Senior Pioneer Leader made several steps ahead towards the center of the formation, yet without reaching it turned around and approached Camp Director to report that the camp was lined-up, and Camp Director responded with the order to hoist or to pull in the Red Flag of the camp, depending on the time of day.

The accordionist stretched the bellows of his instrument and played the hymn of the Soviet Union. Two rank-and-file pioneers called out by Senior Pioneer Leader for their recent achievements and overall merits in the camp life approached the mast. Standing on both sides from it, they pulled the cable running thru 2 pulleys, their hands taking turns at grabbing the cable, and the Red Flag of the camp crept in starts and jerks along the mast, up in the morning and down in the evening, while the lined-up formation stood with their right elbows up, hands straightened and kept diagonally across their respective faces, even Camp Director, caretakers and kids from the youngest platoon though none of them was age eligible for this pioneer salutation…

The clearing with the flag mast was followed by a short tilt, down which there stood a long squat barrack of timber with two large bedroom-wards separated by the central blind partition and filled with rows of spring-mesh beds abutting the windowed sidewalls. Each of the wards ended with the door to the shared square room comprising the whole width of the barrack. There was a small stage with a screen for movie shows and rows of seats for the audience.

Entering the bedroom-wards on the day of arrival, the children were not in a hurry to go and get mattresses, sheets, and blankets from the canteen-etc. building, but instead, they dropped their bags and suitcases on the floor and went amok, leap-racing along the spring-mesh trail of the lined beds which tossed you up in long jumps thru the air. For that particular sports activity, it's vitally important not to collide with a jumper rushing in the opposite direction...

Then everyone opened their suitcases and bags and started to enjoy the sweets, flashing them down with the gulps of treacly condensed milk from blue-and-white tin-cans. As it turned out, for condensed milk consuming, neither an opener nor a spoon was needed. Just find a nail sticking out on the wall and hit against it the upper-side round part of the can, to punch a hole. Make sure the hole's location is near the top rim and not in its center. Produce another hole in the top opposite to the first one and—here you are!—now the condensed milk can easily be sucked out thru any of the holes without smearing your lips and cheeks, as when eating with a spoon from an open tin-can... And if you are not a well-trained puncher, or not tall enough to reach the nail up in the wall, then ask someone of the elder boys – they would punch it for you for just a couple of hearty sucks from your can…

The middle of the square where the camp's platoons fell in was reserved for patches of loosened ground, a patch per platoon. Each day children laid out the date in their platoon's patch with green cones, or fresh twigs, or chopped off flower heads competing for the Best Designed Platoon Calendar.

On Sundays, a big bus was bringing to the camp a pack of parents to treat their children with gingerbread, and sweets, and – lemonade!

Our Mom was taking us over into the greenish shade of trees and watched as we chewed and swallowed, and asked questions about the camp life, while Dad clicked his brand new FED-2 camera. Consuming the treats, we were sharing that the camp life was quite like a camp life. That not long before, all the platoons went out for a hike in the forest and on our return – surprise! There was a restaurant waiting for us on the floor-boarded platform of the pergola, outside the cinema room in the barrack.

As it turned out, the girls from the senior platoon did not participate in hiking and instead set up tables and chairs in the pergola, and cooked the dinner together with the canteen workers. Handwritten menu sheets were put on the tables, and everyone sitting around them summoned the girls with the adult word "Waitress!" And they approached to get the order for "May Salad" or "Onion Salad", the only two items on the menu.

When the restaurant was over, I accidentally overheard two of the waitresses giggling between themselves that everyone asked for "May Salad" while "Onion Salad" was way more delicious and thus the waitresses' share became bigger thanks to the fools easily hooked by mere look of words on a piece of paper.

> (… and I promised myself: in future, never get fooled by tinsel wrappers. Yes, because by that time unrestrained reading had made a rather pathetic kid of me loaded with a big stock of weird vocabulary...)

Regrettably, the daily schedule in the camp retained an obnoxious vestige from the kindergarten past under the new name of "stiff hour". After the midday meal, everyone should go to their wards and to their beds. Get asleep!

Sleeping in the middle of a day just did not work and the two-hour-long "stiff hour" progressed at a snail rate. All the spooky stories been told and listened to for the millionth time, both about the woman in white who drank her own blood, and about the flying black hand that had no body to it but kept regularly strangling anyone on its way, and all the other gory horrors, yet there still remained the same unchanging 38 minutes before the long-awaited-for shout "Get up!."

Once at the midday meal in the canteen, I got aware of obviously clandestine gestures of 3 boys at my table, their exchange of silent nods and winks was nothing but some double talk with secret code signs. Clear as daylight – there was some collusion. And me?

So I accosted one of them in earnest until he shared the secret scheme. They conspired to flee the "stiff hour" that day and go to the forest, where one of them knew a spot of such raspberries that had more berries than leaves in their bushes.

The midday meal over, the fugitive boys run stealthily in the direction opposite that to the barrack. I follow them, repulse the leader's attempt at turning me back to the ward-bedroom, and crawl in the wake of the others under the barbed wire of the fence into the forest.

We arm ourselves with the rifles made of breakable tree branches and walk along a wide footpath among the Pines and shrubs. The leader steers into some glade after which we again

enter the forest missing the footpath already. We wander for a long time without finding any raspberries but only the bushes of wolf-berries which you should skip eating because they're poisonous.

Finally, we get fed up with the useless search, and our leader admits that he can't not find the promised raspberries, for which news he gets the multi-voiced "eew! you!", and our wandering thru the forest goes on until we come across 2 threads of barbed wire nailed to the trees, one above the other, to form a fence.

Following the prickly guidance of the camp fencing, we come up to the already familiar footpath and our perked-up leader commands to fall in. Looks like we're going to play War-Mommy. The order is executed eagerly, we line up along the footpath, pressing the dried boughs of our assault rifles to our stomachs.

But suddenly, two grown-up women—the camp caretakers—jump out from behind a thick bush with a loud yell, "Drop weapons down!" We let our sticks fall and, in the already formed file, are convoyed to the camp gate. One of the captors walks ahead of us, the other closes the formation...

At the evening all-out line-up, Camp Director announced that there happened a disruptive incident at the camp, and the parents of those involved would be informed, besides, there would be raised the question of expelling the escapers from the camp.

After the line-up dispersed, my brother-'n'-sister came to me from their junior platoon, "Now, you'll sure get hell!"

"Ah!" dismissively waved I, trying to conceal the fear caused by the uncertainty of the punishment for getting raised the question of expelling. That uncertainty nagged me till the end of the week with the Parents' Day on Sunday…

Our parents came as usual, and Mom shared between us condensed milk and biscuits, but she never mentioned my involvement in the disruptive occurrence. A beam of hope flicked for me—perhaps, Camp Director forgot to inform my parents!

When they left, Natasha told me that Mom new about the incident all along and, in my absence, asked her who else was among the runaways.

On getting the exhaustive report, she turned to Dad and said, "Well, you bet, the kids of those aren't going to be expelled."

~ ~ ~

At the end of that same summer, there occurred a drastic change in our Block's way of life. Now, every morning and evening, a slow-go garbage truck entered the Courtyard, honked loudly and waited for the tenants of the houses to bring their garbage buckets and empty them into its dump. Besides, they took away the rusty boxes from the garbage bins enclosure and nailed up its gate.

In September in the field between the Bugorok-Knoll and the defunct enclosure, there for several days roared and clattered a bulldozer moving mountains of earth. Then it disappeared, leaving behind a wide field leveled two meters lower than the one we used to play football, yet without a single grass blade crisscrossed instead by footprints of its caterpillar tracks in the raw ground…

A month later, they organized a Sunday of Collective Free Work for adults only, but my Dad allowed me to go with him too. On the edge of the wood behind the next block, there stood a long building very much alike to the barrack in the pioneer camp, and the people who participated in the Sunday of Collective Free Work attacked it from all ends and started to demolish.

My Dad climbed to the very top. He tore away whole chunks of the roof and sent them down shouting his farewell, "Eh! Pulling down differs from building up – no blueprints needed!"

I liked that Sunday of Collective Free Work very little because they would drive you away everywhere, "Don't come closer!" And simply listening to the screams of nails being torn from the beams and boards, becomes boring quite soon…

> (…I cannot now recollect if it was it on the eve of that Sunday or immediately after it, that Nikita Khrushchev got deposed and Leonid Brezhnev became the ruler of the USSR in his place.
>
> Ew! So untimely! When there remained just 18 years before Communism get built in our country!.)

In his very practical book, Ernest Seton-Thompson insists that bows have to be made of Ash-tree boughs. But could you find an Ash-tree at the Object, please?

The woods around the Block were populated by Pines and Fir-trees, as well as deciduous Birch and Aspen, and all the rest might be considered just shrubs. That's why, following the advice of the neighbor at our landing, Stepan Zimin, my bows were made of Juniper.

It's important to make the right choice because the Juniper for a bow should not be too old, having lots of side branches, neither too thick which would be impossible to bend. A tree of about one-and-a-half-meter tall would be the thing, both springy and strong. The arrow shot with the bow made of such a Juniper would rise in the gray autumn sky about thirty meters or so, you'd barely see it before its precipitous down-fall to stick the ground by the arrowhead of a nail fixed, as tight as you can, with electrical tape.

The best material for an arrow shaft is a thin plaster lath, all you have to do is just split it lengthwise, round and shave the shaft with a knife, then smooth it with sandpaper. It's only my arrows missed fletching, although Seton-Thompson explains how it is done. But where could I get the feathers from? No use to ask Dad, there's nothing but machinery at his work….

On the winter vacations, I learned that the boys from both blocks on the Gorka often visited the Regiment Club for watching movies there. (The Regiment was where the soldiers carried on

their army service after graduating from the Recruit Depot Barracks.) Going there for the first time was a bit scary because of the vague rumors among children about some soldier strangling some girl in the forest. No one could explain how and why, but that bad soldier must have been a “blackstrapper” while in the Regiment all the soldiers wore red shoulder straps.

The way to the Regiment was not short, two times as long as to school which you bypassed on the right and the trail became wider and straighter, bound by the walls of tall Fir-trees until you went out onto the tarmac road which ended by the gate guarded by sentries, however, they did not stop boys and you could go on to the building with the signboard Regiment Club.

Inside, you got into a wide long corridor with 3 double doors in its blind wall. The other wall had windows in it and between them, as well as between the double doors, there hung a row of same-sized pictures portraying different soldiers and officers with brief descriptions of their selfless deeds and heroic deaths defending our Soviet Homeland.

The wide double doors opened to a huge hall without windows and full of plywood seats arranged in rows facing the wide stage with crimson velvet curtains. Those were partly drawn to both sides so as to open the wide white screen for movies. From the stage to the back wall—which had a pair of square black holes high up, near the ceiling, for movie projection—stretched the long passage splitting the hall into two equal halves…

The soldiers entered in groups, speaking loudly, stomping their boots against the boards in the paint-coated floor and, gradually, they filled the seats with their uniformed mass and the whole of the hall with the thick indistinct hum of their talking to each other. Time dragged awfully slowly. There were no pictures on the whitewashed walls and I re-read, over and over again, the two inscriptions on the red-clothed frames that screened the speaker boxes on both sides of the stage.

A portrait of a cut-out bearded head with the thick turf of hair was mounted onto the left frame and followed by the lines: “In science, there is no wide highway, and only they who fear no fatigue but keep climbing its stony footpaths will reach its shiny peaks.” The concluding line underneath explained whose head and words they were: “K. Marx.”

And, next to the velvet folds in the curtain drawn to the right, a head without hair and with a small wedge-like beard made it clear (even before reaching the bottom-most line) that it was Lenin who curtly said, “The cinema is not only an agitator but also a remarkable organizer of the masses.”

As the soldiers filled the entire hall, the schoolboys moved from the front rows over onto the stage and watched the movies from the backside of the taut screen. Not much difference if Amphibian Man dived from the cliff left to right contrary to what saw the watchers in the hall. And the rebel Kotovsky would all the same escape from the courtroom thru the window... Although, some boys stayed in the hall perching on the armrests between the seats because the soldiers did not mind.

At times, in the darkness illuminated by the flicks of the running film, there sounded a yell from one of the 3 double doors, “Lance-corporal Solopov!.” Or else, “The second squad!.” But each yell from any of the doors ended the same way, “To the exit!”

If the movie suddenly broke off and the hall sank in complete darkness, there arose a deafening wall of whistles and rambling boot-stomp at the floor and yells “shoemaker!!.” from all the sides…

After the movies at the Regiment Club, we walked home thru the night forest retelling each other the episodes of what we had just watched together, “Now! I say! The way he punched him!” “Hey! Hey! I say! The guy never knew what hit him!”

Of course, the Regiment Club was not the only place for movie-going. There always remained the House of Officers but there you had to buy a ticket and, therefore, come with your parents, yet they never had time for movies. True, on Sundays, there was demonstrated a free film for schoolchildren: black-and-white fairy tales or a color film about the young partisan pioneer Volodya Dubinin…

~ ~ ~

One Sunday morning, I told Mom that I was going out to play.

“Think before you speak up! Who plays outside in such weather? Look!”

The scudding shoots of rime snow scratch-and-scraped the murky dusk outside the panes in the kitchen window.

“See this mayhem?”

But I croaked and grumbled and never got off her back until Mom grew angry and told me to go wherever I wished.

I went out into the boundless Courtyard. No one at all, the desolate space around looked so too gloomy to stay in. Turning my face away from the snappy slaps from the wild snow torrents, I bypassed the house corner and crossed the road to the field next to the nailed up garbage enclosure. There also was nobody except for me, but I couldn’t see myself. All I could see was the outright turmoil full of violent blizzard lashing the dull gray world by the serpent-like belt of prickly snow. I felt lonely and wished I were back home. But Mom would say, “So I told you!”, and the younger would start giggling.

Then from the far edge of the field where long-long ago they played volleyball and *gorodki* in summer, there came a voice of the aluminum loudspeaker on top of a wooden post not seen thru so hurly-burly weather, “Dear children! Today we’ll learn the song about Merry Drummer. Listen to it first.” And a well-trained quire of children's voices began to sing of a clear morning at the gate, and the maple drumsticks in the hands of Merry Drummer.

The song was over and the announcer commenced to dictate the lyrics so that the listeners by their radios would write it down word for word, "Get up ear-ly, get up ear-ly, get up ear-ly, with the first light of the mor-ning by the gate…"

And I already was not alone in the grim world getting belted. I waded thru the snowdrifts but the snow could not get to me because of my thick pants pulled tightly over my felt boots. The announcer finished dictating the first verse, and let me listen to it sung by the quire. Then he dictated the second, also with the subsequent singing thru it, and the third.

"Now, listen to the whole song, please."

And there gathered quite a lot of us—both Merry Drummer, and the children with their merry voices, and even the blizzard turned into one of us and wandered by my side across the field, hither and thither. Only that I kept falling thru the crust into the sifted powder snow under it, and the blizzard danced above, scattering its prickly pellets.

When I got home Mom asked, "Well, seen anyone there?"

I said "no" but no one laughed.

~ ~ ~

The solitary walk in the big company, under the dictation about Merry Drummer, laid me up in bed with the temperature. It was strangely quiet all around with everyone gone to work and to school.

Because the books from the Detachment's Library finished and there was no one to go and exchange them for me, I had to pick one from our home library that filled a shelf in the closet of the cupboard in the parents' room. After a certain hesitation, I chose the one that for a long time had been attracting me by its title, but whose thickness shooed off, the four-volume *War and Peace* by Tolstoy.

The opening chapter confirmed my fears by its text in French running page after page, however, it eased off when I noticed that it was translated in the footnotes... Because of that novel, I did not notice my illness but hastily swallowed the medicines and hurried back to Pierre, Andrey, Petya, Natasha… at times forgetting to take thermometer from out of my armpit….

I read all the volumes and the epilogue, yet the concluding part—the discourse on predestination, I couldn't overcome. Its endless sentences turned into a bluff of glass where, climbing up for a tad bit, I invariably slipped back to its foot. The insurmountable glass-wall stretched in both directions, and there was no way to figure out where I got to that point from. The last volume was closed without reading it up to the very end.

> (…a couple of years ago I re-read the novel, from cover to cover, and said that if a person was capable of writing like Tolstoy in that concluding part of *War and Peace* then why bothering themselves with all that prelude fiction, including the epilogue?

Probably, I kinda showed off, in part, but only just in part…)

And while I was lying on my folding bed amid the battlefield of Austerlitz, life was not standing still. My sister-’n’-brother kept bringing news that the garbage enclosure had been pulled down and replaced by a shed. And the field between the shed and the Bugorok-Knoll turned into a skating rink! As big as all that field leveled by the solitary bulldozer back in autumn. Yes, there arrived a fire-engine, they dropped the hoses on the ground and leaked tons of water. It’s a real skating-rink now! And they were lending out skates at the shed! You could come and borrow skates or, optionally, bring your own and go skating!

I did not want to lag behind life, and promptly recovered. Still, I was late. They were no longer lending skates at the shed, and you had to bring some with you. The benches in the shed were still in place, so you could sit down and put on the skates you brought, leaving your felt boots under the bench or in a locker if there remained any vacant one, and go skating.

As it turned out, there were 2 sheds, cheek by jowl, and 2 doors upon a high wooden porch. The door on the right led to the locker-room, and the other one to the warm-up room equipped with the electric skate grinder and a stove made of a wide iron barrel. The hot fire crackled in the stove to warm your frozen hands or dry up your mittens. You had to look out though to take your mittens off the stove in time or they'd stink with singed wool they're knitted of. Yehk!

No words could ever describe my desire to become a skater. How deliciously crunched the ice under the skates! And you didn’t run, but flew like a winged swift shooting ahead of the crispy crunch of your steely blades!.

I started learning with double-bladed skates, which had strings to tie them to boots, and I was laughed at for using such kindergarten playthings. “Snegoorki” came in their place, the round-nosed skates of one blade each, but also with the strings for tying. And nothing came out with them either, no flight, no joy, just some odd iron pieces on my felt boots. Finally, Mom brought from someplace real “half-Canadians” riveted to the shoes of their own.

With those real skates hung over my shoulder, I hurried to the locker room at the skating rink. I put them on and went out on ice. All I could get there was an awkward hobbling back and forth. The skates did not want to stand evenly, they kept falling in or out, giving painful twists to my feet. I had to return back to the locker-room walking the snowdrifts around the skating rink, where dense snow kept the skate blades upright which prevented them from breaking my tortured ankles out.

The final attempt occurred in the evening after Dad came home from work and had his supper. At my request, he tightly laced the “half-Canadians” making them one with my legs. I went out the door and clattered down the flights leaning onto the handrail. From where the railing ended I walked to the entrance door with my hand to the wall. The outer wall of the house supported me on my way around the building. Farther on, there were auxiliary snowdrifts, but the road I had to cross fluttering my hands like a tightrope walker.

At last, I got to the skating rink to see that the uptight lacing brought no improvement, the skates again were breaking my feet in and out even though cinched by Dad… I stood there for some time, in pain and envy to the crowd of wing-footed ones happily rushing around me, before to start the endless hurtful way back.

(…and never more in my life tried I to skate.

" He cannot fly who's born to crawl."…)

~ ~ ~

On a clear day-off our landing neighbor, Stepan Zimin, suggested I join a ski walk he and his son Yura were taking in the forest, for which occasion Dad went down to our basement section and brought the skies. The leather loop in the middle of each ski allowed slipping your felt boot's nose into it. 2 pieces of white rubber band, like that in underpants, each tied to another leather loop, served elastic nooses about the felt boot heels not to let the skis slide off.

Both Yura and I had a pair of ski poles each but Stepan went out with just skies on his feet but—whew! —he moved so nimbly without any poles! He glided down the Gorka and we followed, falling and getting up to glide farther on.

Then we turned into the forest to the left from the Recruit Depot Barracks and walked thru the almost impenetrable thicket of the half-dried Pine trees. We came across a couple of square holes in the deep snow there. Stepan explained they were dugouts during the war for the soldiers to live in. It was hard to believe because the war ended before my birth, which meant ages and ages ago, and in the course of so long a period all the trenches, and dugouts, and bomb-holes should have completely got leveled up and effaced from the earth….

Never again Stepan went out for a ski walk, but I liked skiing and started to glide down the hillocks and knolls nearest to the road surrounding the two blocks. And, of course, I volunteered to participate in the ski competition held at school, for which occasion, on the eve of the cross-country race, I asked Dad to change the worn-out rubber bands on the leather loops in my skies. He casually dismissed the problem saying they're sturdy enough to hold on, and there's nothing to bother about.

The start was given from the glade where in autumn they pulled down the barrack on the Sunday of Collective Free Work. From the start point the ski track went into the forest and after zigzagging there for a couple of kilometers returned back, start and finish at the same point: 2 in 1.

Our group of fourth-and-fifth-graders was flagged off all at once, with a senior schoolboy running ahead of us so that we wouldn't go astray among other ski tracks there. I was getting overtaken, and I was overtaking others yelling at them eagerly, "The track! The track!", so that they would give way along the two narrow unbroken ski prints in the snow. And when they shouted "The track!" behind my back, I reluctantly stepped aside into the untrodden sticky snow, because that's the rule.

We ran, and we glided, and we ran again. Down one especially steep slope, we piled in over each other. I got from the pile one of the first and frantically rushed ahead, but some two hundred meters before the finish that meanie rubber band burst up and the ski slid off from my felt boot. Keeping back scorching tears, I reached the finish in only left ski, driving the right one with kicks along its part in the ski track. The refs liked it, they laughed, but I, on coming home, burst into tears, "I knew it! I warned! I asked!"

Mom went on at Dad, who wanted to talk back but couldn't find what to say. The next day he brought from his work and fixed to the ski leather loops some elastic band of ivory color, as thick as a pinky finger.

> (…that fixture never failed, and even twenty-two years later the band served as it should.
>
> Skies, on the whole, are doggedly long-liver creatures…)

With so reliable fasteners, on Sundays I was taking to the woods all day long. The endless well-trodden ski track stretched from beyond anything to out of everything. At times, the ski track branched off and two tracks ran along, side by side.

I liked the snappy claps of skies against the ski track behind my back. On the way, I sometimes met single soldier-skiers enjoying their Sundays with their greatcoats left at the Regiment, flapping the loosened uniform shirts not girded by the army belt.

The unbending ski track led to my favorite gliding grounds—a deep combe where the speed gained by the onrush down one slope took you up about one-third of the opposite one. I was delighted and proud that I could plunge like those solitary soldiers, although at times I had mind-blowing falls, especially at the jump ramp they built of snow for their jumps…

One day I noticed a secluded ski track forking from the mainline which—as I gradually figured it out—was running along the former controlling clearing of the Mailbox-Zona-Object-Detachment before its expansion.

The fugitive ski track led me to an astounding ski-plunge slope in the depth of the thicket. Though the slope was grown with perennial Fir-giants dictating an abrupt turn at its foot, yet, if you did not fall at that point, the plunge took you amazingly far with the speed squeezing tears from your eyes and making repeat the drive over and over again…

Following Sunday I almost did not fall at that tricky turn and rode the slope till very late, when the deep violet shadows began to trickle down from the dense branches of Fir-trees laden with the thick snow layer.

Then all of a sudden, there came a strange feeling that I was not alone, that someone else was watching me from behind the backs of the mighty Firs. At first, it was scary but giving heed to the benevolent silence of the trees around, I realized that it was him, the forest, friendly spying

on me because we were one—me and the forest... The twilight deepened and I remembered that Block was more than two kilometers away.

> (…of course, I got home in the dark and bore the brunt of Mom's displeasure, yet until now when recollecting that winter purplish twilight and the good-willed quietude of the forest, I know that I lived not just so...
>
> The same feel of dissolving and turning into a part of everything else around when you cannot say where your "I" ends and turns this or that "not-me", I've lived thru once again and much later, in Karabakh already. Only that time it was I who watched, and it happened in summer instead of winter.
>
> Even though telling this story disrupts the linear flow of narrative, in full violation of the classical time-place-action-unity canon yet, after all, it is my letter and it's my life, and why not to take turns to my liking?
>
> So…)

~ ~ ~

In Stepanakert, I am not to be seen a day or two before my birthday and about as long after it because for that period I enjoy the freedom of hiking.

> (…dig it? Summertime is the most advantageous season to be born into not only because fish are jumping and your daddy is rich…)

My local relatives have already given up to be surprised or get angry. They concluded that it's an old, odd but firmly established, Ukrainian tradition—to go away for your birthday and just walk following a random look of your eyes. And so it was in August (I don't remember the exact year) end nineties'. Yes, no later, because of this here tent was bought in the last year of the last millennium.

That August I went north thru the woods over *toombs* where there were no villages but the views of enthralling beauty. Exactly as in the age-old warning by Mom, "You'll be there alone."

After a day-long climbing up to ascend a *toomb*-ridge where the woods got replaced by the alpine meadows, I came across some soot-black pieces of slate and a bunch of charred poles. Apparently, before the war shepherds were coming there with their flocks, and they brought the construction materials to build a hovel. And who burned it? Well, you never know… why always to find fault with humans? could be a random lightning after all… Anyway, nothing of my business.

So, I passed and went on, higher, and in a saddle bridging two *toombs* I discovered an ancient toomb. How did I guess at its antiquity? An easy question... It was excavated, unearthed by scavengers greedy for a buried treasure who left a hole in the ground and 4 to 5 roughly-hewn stone slabs, half-ton each. People weren't buried that way under socialism, nor in the capitalist

epoch. The nearby ridges were not rocky so the slabs had to be transported from afar. But what for?

Well, one look around would remove the question— What a sweep of incredible beauty! The sky without any limit, the placid wavy chines of toomb-chains all around, the distant ones covered with dark woods, and those nearby with Alpine meadows... Now, bringing the slabs from as far as I could not suppose where would call for a plum sum of money, or real power, or both. Which made more than enough of clues for the unbeatable guess: it was one of the Karabakh melique-princes who one day rode out hunting, reached that place and fell in love with it, and didn't want to get parted from it even after his demise. The only nagging flaw in his calculations— the greed of ashes desecraters was not taken into account.

See? No historical enigma can escape its ultimate solution when we apply to it our tall tales in the absence of any opponent…

I passed over to the next *toomb* and, on its summit, got under the rain. Not a big deal though, because for such occasions, I've got a thoroughly worked-out and pretty practical technique.

So, as usual, I took off all of my clothes, packed them into a cellophane bag and started dancing in the altogether under the downpour. Those dances, actually, were never meant as some pagan ritual, they're intended to keep me warm, in the mountains up there without the sun and under the rain it's really chilly, let me assure you. But still some tinge of witching paganism is also there or else where those primeval yells come from to accompany the free nude dances? Anyway, solitude does have certain advantages— you're not likely to be arrested for violation of public order and morals.

And, after the rain is over, I simply rub-dry myself with the sweater and put on the dry clothes from the bag, ain't I a smart guy?

But that time after one rain there came another, and my second dancing was not as enthusiastic as the previous. The additional rain also let up after all, and I prepared to stay overnight in a shallow hollow to hide from the cold night wind.

About midnight the drops of one more rain tap-tapped on my sleeping bag and made me realize that I was kaput. A raging stream of rainwater ran down the hollow, I struggled out of the sleeping bag put it on my back and stood with my legs wide apart giving way to the running spate. That's when I guessed that my sleepover spot was just a gulch, but I could not leave it either because of the squally wind joining the fun. There was nothing to do but wait for the dawn in the posture of the letter Z, clutching my knees with my hands, under the sleeping bag on my back, drenched thru and thru, and the rivulet running between my feet. The uncontrollable inside shudder mingled with the lashing by outside chilly rains, which that night I lost count of…

The morning started thru a thick mist, yet with no rain, except for random drizzling, and the wind also began to abate… Jerking like an epileptic, I squeezed the water out of my clothes and the sleeping bag, as much as my cold-stiffened hands could manage to. I had not the slightest desire

to go any farther, hearth and home were all I craved for. So, I went back, yet even walking did not warm me up, I was too busy being trembling all the time.

Normally, going downhill is easier than going uphill, but for me that difference was somehow gone and at times I was sort of floating, while to the hearths of civilization there still remained at least a day of normal walking. That's when I remembered the slate— it was much closer if only I could find it. It's somewhere along the edge of the wood. For which reason, down that toomb, I was descending in zigzags so as not miss the slate pieces in the tall grass.

And I did find the place.

Seized by the sticky shivering tremor on one hand and overwhelming stiffness on the other, I started to restore the shed and the work warmed me better than walking... The thing I accomplished looked like a crude tent of fire-smeared slate pieces. Inside, it was tall enough for sitting on the ground and more than enough to stretch for the whole body length.

Then I built a fire at the entrance with the wreckage of poles and deadwood which I dragged from the nearby coppice. I warmed my sides by the fire and began to dry up the sleeping bag. When the color of its fabric turned lighter and stopped issuing any steam, I believed in the probable survival.

All next day the sun was glaring blindingly, but I had a slanted roof of slates over my head supported by the charred poles—used as the promenade by the soundless lizards as lazy as I was, because in all that day I went out just once— to collect an armful of grass and spread it under the sleeping bag on the ground...

And so it went on, day after day, without any changes, if not for the growing company—cautious dormice joined me and the lizards. They did not dare step over the fire ashes, so I left a piece of baked potato outside, but the rest, together with bread and cheese, hung in the haversack up the rafter poles under the slate.

At nights, the full moon rose to fill the world with clear-cut shadows. On one of those well-illuminated nights, I went out to take a leak, and on the way thru the tall grass, from under my feet there burst a brood of quail with the loud flutter of wings and shrill outcry, "Damn sleepwalker! Watch your step! We're sleeping here!" As if I was not scared stiff by them!

In the light of day, over the wide expanse of the valleys, the vultures glided without ever moving their wings. Watching them from the depths of valleys you turn your face up to see their circling so high above, but now, lying on my sleeping bag, I didn't even have to stick my head out of the slate tent.

When one of them trespassed the invisible borderline between their hunting grounds, the skylord soared higher and, folding his wings, fell down upon the brazen prowler like a stone. I heard the wheezing sound of the air cut by his dive next to the slate tent entrance. He missed, however, or maybe was not keen on hitting but only wanted to warn and shoo off the sneaking bastard. All of us are blood kin, after all.

And so it went on…

All my business was to roll over from one side to the other, from the belly to the back, having no desires, neither ambitions nor plans. Sometimes, I was falling asleep with no regard to the time of day because it made no difference…

Well, and I also watched, of course. I watched how beautiful and perfect the world is...

Sometimes I think, maybe the purpose of man's existence is just seeing this beauty and perfection. Man is merely a mirror for the world to look into, otherwise, it would not know its own beauty…

Six days later, I returned to civilization, just for the sake of righteousness.

On coming back, to all the questions I responded in quite a laconic way because my vocal cords, after being idle for so long, became too lazy and I could only speak in a hoarse whisper.

> (…all I want to say is that both times—in that winter forest, and among the summer *toombs*—I had the same feeling that I was not alone and someone else was watching that ski-riding kid and the supine lazybones in the shade of burned slate pieces and, more strangely, I was a part of that someone and watched myself from the twilight of the winter forest and from the tall grass on the *toomb* slope because we all are involved…
>
> Well, on the whole, some weird stuff, a folly accomplished…)

~ ~ ~

With the spring at hand, we, the fourth-graders, started active preparation for getting enrolled to the ranks of young pioneers to reach which goal we copied and memorized the Solemn Oath of Young Leninists. Then one day after the break, Seraphima Sergeevna entered the classroom with an unknown woman. She introduced her as the new School Pioneer Leader and said that we were going to have a Leninist Lesson and for that purpose we had to go out into the corridor now and keep very quiet there because the other classes were at their regular lessons.

We went out into the long corridor on the second floor, where along its walls with the windows on the left and the rare doors to the classrooms on the right, there hung different pictures with differently-aged Lenin in all of them… The new School Pioneer Leader commenced from the very beginning. Here, he's quite a young man, a youth, actually, after getting the news about the execution of his elder brother Alexander by the Czarist regime, he consoles his mother with the words "We'll go another way", which is the name of this famous picture, by the way.

And our class followed her quietly to the next poster with his photograph in the group of comrades from the underground committee… The working silence reigned in school, we passed by the closed doors of the classrooms with the school children sitting behind them and only we, like secret conspirators, veered from the usual course of the school regime and seemed to have

joined the life of underground, following the quiet voice directing us from a picture to a picture…

Then the spring came, and again the thawed patches appeared on the slope between Block and the Recruit Depot Barracks but I wasn't checking them anymore… One sunny day coming home from school, I took over an unfamiliar girl of my age. Maybe, from the parallel fourth grade. I get ahead of her and looked back at the face full of absolute lack of care about my walking along.

The brag just asked for a small demonstration that I was a boy of consequence in the surrounding whereabouts. And besides, I had a gang of my own, like Robin Hood, the noble robber. Still walking on, I half-turned to the left and told with eloquent gestures to the Bugorok-Knoll beyond the decaying skating rink, "Hey! Don't be so careless! Duck!! Don't let them spot you!" So, if the snooty girl looked that way, no one would be seen there…

Another time, with the snow, completely gone, I was going the same route and squinting because if you squint without closing your eyes completely, but only to the point when the eyelashes from your upper and lower eyelids meet and touch each other, you'd see the world as if thru the transparent wings of a dragonfly. That way I was not, actually, walking but flying in a tiny dragonfly-like helicopter and watching thru its Plexiglas roof which I saw in *The Funny Pictures* because even though I was past the preschool age I still turned pages of that magazine for small kids whenever it came my way.

And then I remembered how rebellious Kotovsky, in the movie "Kotovsky" at the Regiment Club, answered the arrogant landlord, "I am Kotovsky!" After which he grabbed him and threw thru the window panes of the landlord's house.

So I also grabbed the rich scoundrel by the breast of his jacket and threw him into the roadside ditch. And I proudly called myself with the glorious name, "I am Kotovsky!" Yay! And it was so good to feel myself so strong. That's why I replayed the episode several times walking uphill to Block. And why not? Who was to see me along the empty road?

At home, Mom told how she and Paulyna Zimin had a hearty laugh watching thru the neighbor's window my grabs and throws of nobody knew who. But I never confessed that I was Kotovsky at the moment….

End April, we became young pioneers. The ceremony took place not at school but in front of the House of Officers because there stood the big gypsum head of Lenin upon the tall pedestal.

The night before, Mom ironed my trousers thru gauze and also the white parade-shirt and the scarlet silk triangle of pioneer tie. All those things she hung over the back of a chair so that in the morning everything would be ready. When there was no one in the room, I touched the soft caressing fabric of the pioneer tie. Mom said she had bought it from the store, but it's impossible for such things to be for sale.

The bright morning sun was shining. We, the fourth-graders, stood facing the lined-up ranks of the school children. Our scarlet ties hung on our right arms bent at the elbow, the collars of our shirts were turned up for the senior graders to easily tie our ties around.

Yet before that moment, we chanted the memorized Solemn Oath in front of our comrades to love our Homeland hotly, to live and learn and struggle as admonished by great Lenin, as we were always being taught by the Communist Party….

One week before the end of the academic year I fell ill. Mom thought it was a cold and told me to stay in bed but could not bring the temperature down, and when it rose up to forty she called an ambulance from the Detachment's Hospital because with two more degrees the temperature would become lethal.

I was too lightheaded to be proud or frightened that a whole vehicle came after just me alone. At the hospital, they at once diagnosed pneumonia and began to knock the temperature down with penicillin injections every half-hour. I did not care. A day later the injection frequency was reduced to one per hour, the following day – one in two hours…

The patients in the ward were all adults, soldiers from the Regiment. In four days, I was quite okay and walking in the garden around the Hospital, when our class together with the teacher came to visit me and hand over the report card with my grades.

I felt uncomfortable and, for some reason, ashamed, so I ran away around the corner followed by the boys of our class. But then we returned, and the girls together with the teacher handed me my award for successful studies and exemplary behavior. It was the book of *The Russian Epic Tales* which Grandma Martha read to me, and my sister-'n'-brother, but only quite a new one... That way, little by little, things began somehow repeat themselves in my life…

In summer we were again taken to the pioneer camp to the same canteen, lining-ups, bedroom ward, "stiff hours", and Parental Days. Though certain things had notably changed because as a full-fledged pioneer, I already belonged to the Third Platoon which, together with the First and Second ones, was eligible for swimming in the lake. But first, we had to wait a week in anxious hope that it shouldn't rain on the appointed day.

We waited eagerly, and on the swimming day the weather was not rainy, so two trucks with canvas tops took us to the Sominsky lake. The road went thru the forest, along some narrow endless clearing. And the ride was also very long because we had sung all the pioneer songs, both my favorite "ah, potato's so tasty-tasty-tasty-tasty…", and the one I liked less, but still for pioneers – "we marched to the ding of the cannonade…", and, well, all that we knew, anyway, but the road did not end and I felt sick with all those jolts on the bumps in the road. Then those, who sat at the square window cut in the front canvas wall, shouted that something was seen ahead and the truck pulled up on a grassy shore of a big lake amid the forest.

They allowed us to enter the water not all at once but in turn, one platoon after another. The water was very dark, and the bottom felt unpleasantly quaggy, and they too soon yelled from the shore, "Third platoon – out!"

At first, I only stood up to the chest in the water doing shallow hops. But then they gave me an air-filled life ring of rubber and showed how to row with my hands and kick my legs for swimming. Soon both the caretakers and the pioneer leaders grew bored to command the platoons in and out of the water, so everybody stayed there as long as they wanted. I let the air out of the life ring and made sure that I could still swim for a couple of meters.

At the end of the day, when they yelled everyone to get ashore because we were leaving, I tarried a bit for the final check that the skill remained by me and gratefully uttered in my mind, “Thank you, the Sominsky lake!”

The next time, they took us to the Lake of Glubotskoye. The elder platoons said it was even better because the lake had a beach and sandy bottom. The way over there was much longer but asphalted, and we were going by bus so I was not sick at all.

Yay! What a huge lake it was! They said channels were connecting it to other lakes visited by passenger boats with excursions to the Ant Island. The island was so big that long ago there was a monastery surrounded with the forest full of giant ant-heaps. Whenever any of the monks was not behaving, they tied him up and dropped onto an ant-heap. The ants thought they got under attack and hurried out to defend their city, so in just one day they gnawed the punished away, leaving only his polished skeleton.

But from the bathing place neither boats nor islands were seen, only the very distant opposite shore. Yet, the bottom turned out sandy indeed, firm and pleasant to step along, only you had to wade and wade on before you reached a place deep enough for swimming.

When wading back, I deeply cut my feet near the big toe. The cut was bleeding profusely and, on the shore, they bandaged it at once. A dark spot showed thru the bandage, but the blood stopped spewing.

They yelled to everyone about the beach to be cautious, and then one of the adults found a broken bottle in the sandy bottom and threw it farther away in the direction of the opposite shore, but it did not console me. On our way back, I even began to whimper because it felt so hurting and unfair that in the whole bus only just one foot got cut and it was mine.

One of the caretakers told me, “What a shame! Are you a guy or a dishrag?”

The question stopped my sniveling, and in my subsequent life, whenever traumatized, I mulishly pretended not to feel pain and acted a manly man.…

Twice per shift, we were taken to the bath-house in the nearby village of Pistovo. The first time I missed because I went back to the platoon ward to pick the forgotten bar of soap, and when I came running back, the buses had already left.

The camp became quiet and empty, there remained only the cooks at the canteen and me. You could do whatever you wanted and go wherever you wished, even to the tents of First Platoon with iron beds on the rough floor-boards, where the finely carved shadows of the nearby tree

foliage danced upon the sun-warmed canvas walls. But I, for some reason, climbed upon the narrow booth of deals with an iron barrel on its top.

It was the shower for the caretakers and pioneer leaders, who filled half the barrel with pails of water for the sun to heat it. The whole two-hour solitude I spent atop that booth, wandering along the narrow beams supporting the barrel, until the camp returned from Pistovo…

And I did not miss the second visit to the bath-house, but it disappointed me—the huge unbearably noisy room had no bath-tubs at all! You had to wash yourself throwing water up at you from a tin basin with tin ears for grabbing when carried. On the wall, there were two taps, side by side, one for boiling hot water, and the other for cold. You put your basin on a low table beneath the taps but it was hard to mix their waters to your liking because the line of boys with their empty basins yelled from behind your back to be quick…

The shift at the camp traditionally ended with the Farewell Bonfire which was built in the far end of the field with the rusty mast of the never-used attraction nearby the edge of the forest behind the barbed wire.

After the breakfast in the morning, the senior platoons marched to that forest thru a temporary passage in the 2-barbed-wire fence opened by a couple of 2-meter-tall spanner-boughs and harvested dry firewood for the Farewell Bonfire. The harvesting went on after the "stiff hour" too and by the evening on the field edge accumulated a heap of dry branches taller than a grown-up man. In the dusk of the nearing summer night, that heap was set on fire from all sides and burnt with high flames under our choral songs, and the marches from the accordionist.

Then Camp Director and the caretakers began to argue in agitated voices. Finally, Camp Director agreed and gave the orders to his chauffeur. The man shrugged and answered: “If you wish so,” walked to the camp buildings, and drove back in the Camp Director’s car. From the trunk, the chauffeur grabbed a metal canister while the pioneers were ordered to step back from the fire. He splashed onto it from the canister in his hands, and a huge ball of red-and-black flame buzzed and swirled up in the night, for at least three meters high, and then fell back again until the next splash.

In the morning, the buses were taking us home….

~ ~ ~

However, the end of the camp shift did not mean the end of summer. And again there was the Rechka river and playing War-Mommy, Cossacks-and-Robbers, American Ball, and Twelve Chips, as well as the new adventures, borrowed from the Detachment’s Library. However, besides the travels to distant planets and mysterious islands started from the opposite armrests of the big sofa, I also wandered in the forest for quite a few different reasons.

For instance, our neighbor Yura Zimin suggested going there to harvest the Hare Cabbage, and I grew curious about the unheard-of vegetable. Well, though sour, it still was tasty but picking it turned a literal toil because its leaves were so too tiny.

Or else, my sister Natasha would bring the news that in the swamp behind the next block, there were myriads of blueberries, and one boy from the other block brought home a whole milk-can of them! Now, the spirit of competition drove me to the same swamp, I had to collect more blueberries than any "one boy"! Good news the Lowlanders hadn't come to pillage harvest from a swamp upon the Gorka…

But usually, I wandered there alone and almost without any purpose, well, except for hunting a Juniper to make another good bow, or collecting green Pine cones for all sorts of hand-crafted toys.

Stick 4 matches into a green cone and here you have the body of a quadruped. To the body standing on all the four, add a vertical match as the would-be neck, pierce a smaller cone and spit it with the 'neck' match—wow!—you've got a horse now! Just don't forget to attach a tail to it.

After green cones, you have to climb up young Pine trees, whose light-brown bark peels off all too easily to smear your hands with sticky colorless resin, which a few minutes later turns into blackish spots all over your palms, while on your pants it stays as white stains, yet still as sticky as your blackened hands.

The young Pine trees are swaying with the wind and under your weight, Yea-hoo! Super whooper! And their cones are so nice: green scales pressed densely to each other, all glossy as if lacquered, quite different to the cones picked on the ground under big old trees whose cones also got old and black with their scales ruffled and sticking loosely all apart. Yet, even in big Pines, you can find green cones as well, only they're hanging from the very tips of those boughs where you can't climb or pull and bend closer to the branch you're sitting on because they're way too thick…

New occupations spread among boys much faster than a wildfire. As soon as one of them put his hand on some new trick, you'd hardly find the time to wink your eye but everyone already is, like a busy beaver, all in manufacturing explosives.

A land mine of delayed action you can produce just hands down. Fill a glass bottle with water, three-quarter up, and thru the bottle's neck stuff in a wisp of grass, then pour the bluish powder of crushed carbide on top. (Carbide is stored in an iron barrel at the construction site of a five-story building across the road around Block, blackstrapper-soldiers would blink at your ladling handfuls of it into your pants pocket.) Now, seal the bottle tight with a cork whittled from a wood chip, turn the bottle upside down and insert it into some pile of earth or sand. The land mine is ready.

> A word of warning!! Be cautious not to cut your fingers when whittling the cork and, secondly, when sitting on the ground and driving the cork into the charged bottle, don't keep the bottle's neck between your thighs because it might crack and some stray shard would cut your skin just where the shorts end, as it was in my case…

It only remains to wait until the carbide, after getting in contact with the water in the bottle, has issued too much gas for the bottle walls to hold the pressure and it explodes with a loud pop, sending sand and glass splinters in all directions.

Being a book-addict, I often failed to follow the mainstream developments in ever-changing public life…

When tired of reading, I spread the book next to a big sofa's armrest, covers up for the seat to keep it open at the right page and ready to be read on by my return from the Courtyard. Then down I went and stepped out of the entrance door—surprise! A caravan of differently aged boys were crossing the Courtyard hauling pieces of boards, planks, beams... I ran up to ask: what's up? how? where?

They told me to run to the construction site of the five-story building, where another group of boys still collected useful timber that a blackstrapper soldier-guard allowed to lift off. And I arrived there just in time to grab the end of a long plank, chiseled from the guard by elder boys. The soldier only said to be quick, before any one saw us.

Like a string of diligent ants, we dragged the pillage across the Courtyard and down the Gorka, then into the forest at the foot of the steep slope made of the earth chuted down by the bulldozer when leveling the ground for the skating rink.

There, between the trees, sounded hand-saws and hammers clapped in eager heat of enthusiastic labor. The bigger boys were sawing boards and nailing them to the pillars piled into the ground.

With the trained eye of a Construction Modeling Designer, I at a glance saw that it was a shed without any windows and with one, already hinged up, door. Inside, there stood a wooden ladder leaned on the wall beneath the square hatch in the ceiling of long boards. Up I climbed and out onto the flat roof and, at the same time, ceiling of the structure.

A couple of bigger boys were there discussing whether the roof was strong enough and reassuring one another that the shed would serve the headquarters for boys from our Block and not from the twin one.

I asked for a chance to work with a handsaw or hammer, but neither of them gave me his, and they even ordered me to go down and not strain the yielding roof by my additional weight.

I climbed down the ladder. In the half-dark shed and around it, there stayed no one of my peers, and going home to the book waiting for me upon the big sofa, I felt happy that the boys of our Block would have Headquarters of their own, like Timur and his team from the book by Gaidar…

Later, when wandering in the forest, I never missed to check the shed, but nobody was there, and a big padlock hung on its door. The autumn came, a stack of hay appeared next to the shed, and a

team of chicken migrated to it thru the square hen-way, sawed out in the bottom of the door. The Headquarters were obviously canceled…

~ ~ ~

Dad had a hair cutting machine— a nickel-plated critter with two horns or, rather, they were two slender handles. Dad grabbed them both by one hand and put the machine in motion by squeezing and loosening his grip on the handles.

On the haircut day, my brother and I were seated, in turn, in the middle of the kitchen on a stool placed upon a chair, so that we would sit higher and Dad wouldn't have to stoop down to us.

Mom tightly wound a white bedsheet around the neck of her son—whose turn it was—and fixed it with a clothespin. Then she held a large square mirror in front of the brothers, in turn, while sharing her advice to Dad, who waved her words off with only his nose because his right hand was grabbing the machine while his left hand held the customer's head and steered it from side to side, from down to back. And even his jaw was busily moving from side to side repeating the movements of the machine's cutting part.

At times the machine did not cut the hair but pulled at it and that hurt. When that happened, Dad gave out an angry snort and vigorously blew into the machine's underbelly before going on with his work.

Once, the blowing didn't restrain the critter, it still pulled at the hair and Sasha started to cry. Since that day, we visited the hairdresser salon not only before school was starting after the vacations, but whenever Mom decided that we already got too shaggy….

Photography Dad learned himself from a thick book. His FED-2 camera was fixed inside its brown leather case with a narrow shoulder strap, also of leather. For shooting, you had to unbutton the case from behind, drop the case's pug-nosed face to dangle under the camera, take pictures and buckle it back.

Unscrewing and taking the camera out of the case was done after its counter indicated 36 clicks which meant there remained no space for another frame and it's time to replace the film cassette.

The film from the used cassette should be rewound with proper precautions ensuring complete darkness, onto a loose spool in a small round cistern of black plastic with the tightly fitting lid, in which container the film was treated with the developer solution poured inside thru the light-proof hole in the spool's knob which stuck out thru the lid.

After rotating the spool with the loosely wound film on it for five minutes, the solution was poured out of the cistern, the film washed with freshwater and then treated with rotation in the fixing solution followed by one more washing out. For drying, the film was pinned on a rope just like a usual laundry. But if before the final washing, the film got awkwardly exposed to the tiniest beam of light, it got spoiled and instead of frames, you'd have just a glittering black ribbon of a film, a throwaway.

When there collected several developed films, Dad arranged a photo lab in the bathroom. He covered the bath with two deal shields made for the purpose. They served as the desktop upon which he put the photo-projector with its downward-looking lens. In the photo lab, Dad used a special red lamp, because of photo paper's exceeding sensitivity, and only the red light didn't damage it.

The projector was also equipped with a movable light filter of red glass, right beneath the lens, so that light-sensitive photo paper would not become a throwaway while you're adjusting the image sharpness with the lens.

All frames in the film were negative—black faces with white lips and eye sockets, and the hair whiter than snow. After adjusting the sharpness, the red filter was turned aside so that the crude light from the projector would pour thru the film frame onto the paper, while Dad counted down the seconds needed for exposure and then returned the filter back into its place.

Then the completely white sheet of photo paper was taken from under the projector and put into a small rectangular basin filled with the developer solution, which sat next to the red light lamp whose glowing couldn't disperse black darkness in the room and only turned it into a sorcerer's chamber. Under the dim light of the red lantern, commenced the magic in the plastic basin and, on a clean white sheet, there gradually appeared clothes, hair, facial features.

Yet, pictures should not stay in the developer for too long, or their paper would turn into black wet squares. The rightly developed pictures were taken out with the pincers, rinsed in freshwater, and placed in the next small basin with the fixer, otherwise, they would blacken all the same; then, after five to ten minutes, the ready pictures were transferred into a large enamel washing tub filled with water.

When the printing was over, Dad turned on the light in the bathroom, the charmer's chamber disappeared, giving way to a small workshop. Dad took the wet pictures from the basin, put them face down on Plexiglas sheets and ran rubber roller over their backs so that they stuck well.

Those glasses he leaned against the wall in the parents' room, and the following day the dried-up photos fell off the glass to strew the floor, like the leaves from the trees in autumn only white-backed, smooth, and glossy.

…here am I with round eyes and the neck bandaged because of a sore throat …

…brother Sasha looking so credulously into the camera …

…Mom alone, or with her friends, or with the neighbors …

…and that is Natasha with her nose up in the air, and the eyes on something else happening to the right, and the ribbon tie in her pig-tail got undone as always…

Besides photography, Dad also was a radio fan, that's why he subscribed to *The Radio* magazine full of all kinds of charts.

I liked the smell of melted rosin in the kitchen when he worked with his soldering iron, collecting this or that scheme from *The Radio*. Once, he assembled a radio receiver a sliver larger than the FED-2 camera case. At first, it was a thin brown board with radio parts soldered to it, then he made a small box of plywood, polished it and varnished, and hid the board inside. There were just two knobs outside the box: one for adjusting the volume and the other for tuning to a radio station. Then he sewed the case for the receiver from thin leather, because he could work with the awl and knew how to alter a common thread into stitching one by twining it and applying wax and pitch. Finally, he attached a narrow shoulder strap to the case so that you could carry it and still have your hands free.

Later on, Dad made a special machine fixed on a stool to do bookbinding, and bound his The Radio magazines into volumes, one for each year. He had just golden hands.

And Mom, of course, had golden hands too because she cooked tasty meals, sewed with her Singer machine, and once a week did general washing in the washing machine "Oka". At times, she trusted me with squeezing water out of the washing by turning the crank of the wringer fixed on top of the machine. You stick a corner of a washed thing in between its rubber rollers and when you start turning the crank, the washing is pulled thru the wringer, which squeezes brooks of water back into the machine basin. And the thing crawls out behind the rollers thinly pressed and wrung out.

But hanging the washing was a job for adults because there were no linen ropes in the Courtyard and everyone dried their washing in the attic of their house. Only Dad could lift the heavy basin with half-wet things up the vertical iron ladder and thru the hatch above the landing.

However, with his strong, golden, hands, he once created a long-term problem for himself. It's when he made a "bug" inside the electric meter, so that it would not rotate, even with all the lights on and the washing machine buzzing busily in the bathroom.

Dad said it reduced the bills for electricity, but he feared very much that the controllers would catch us "bugging" and punish with a big fine. Why create so much worries for yourself because of saving on bills?

As for Mom, she never did unreasonable things, except for those yellow corduroy shorts with suspenders, that she sewed for me in the kindergarten. Oh, how I hated them! And, as it turned out, not for naught – in those hateful shorts I was when the red cannibal ants molested me so severely…

~ ~ ~

At one of my solo forest walks, I went out into a glade and felt there was something not quite right, yet what namely? Aha! It's the thin smoke that never belonged to the usual woodland picture. And then I saw flames, almost transparent in the sunlight, fluttering, charring the bark of trees and creeping over the thick carpet of dry Pine needles on the ground. So, it's the forest fire!

At first, I tried to trample out the flames on the needles, but it did not work. Yet, a small Juniper with multiple dense twigs severed from its roots turned the right thing for quenching the underfoot flames and was efficiently killing the fire on trees trunks.

After the tiresome fight and glorious victory, the burnt area turned out not enormously big, about ten to ten meters. My shirt and hands bore smudges of black soot, yet I didn't mind because the battle dirt is not dirty. I even ran my sooty hand over my face to ensure it got smeared too so that everyone could see at once – here's the hero who saved the forest from the death in the great fire.

Unfortunately, I met no one on the way home. Walking the empty trail, I dreamed of being written about in *The Pioneer Pravda*, where they published an article about a pioneer who signaled with his red tie to the locomotive driver about the damaged railway ahead.

And only entering the Courtyard, I met, at last, two passers-by. They looked at me alertly but none of them asked, "Where does this black soot in your face come from? It looks like you've been fighting a forest fire, have you?"

At home, Mom yelled at me for going around so dirty, and no washing machine would do to keep my shirts clean. I felt unjustly hurt but suffered silently…

On summer evenings, the children of Block and mothers of those kids, who as of yet were to be looked after, went out of the Courtyard onto the surrounding road of concrete. Everyone was waiting for the platoon from the Recruit Depot Barracks to come up to the road for their usual drilling promenade.

Reaching the concrete surface of the road, the soldiers started to march in parade step. As if in a magic transformation, they seemed to merge into a tight-knit united critter—a closed squad—that had one mutual leg comprising the entire length of the marching flank, the leg fused of dozens of black boots that simultaneously broke away from the road and fell down one step farther, advancing the whole formation for that one step. It looked so fascinating a creature!

Then the sergeant-major tagging with by the squad's side abruptly shouted, "Sing off!" And from the midst of the compact mass, throbbing in time to the mutual "plonk!" of the boot soles against the concrete, a young vibrating tenor rose solo to be followed a few steps farther by the thunder of the supporting chorus:

"…we are the paratroopers,

the wide sky is all for us…

The squad went on and on to the corner of the next block with its inhabitants waiting for it to march by them too, and some children from ours followed it as a running tail, while the young mothers looked in the wake of the soldiers marching to the sun half-sunk in the woods, pervading with its parting rays the evening wrapped into the calm, all-embracing serenity because we were the strongest, and so safely protected by our paratroopers against all the NATO spies in the anteroom to the Detachment's Library…

~ ~ ~

They brought long iron pipes into the Courtyard. When you hit such a pipe with a stick, it rang loudly and longly… Much longer, actually, than needed and for all my effort I could never play the drum roll with which the Whites marched to their "psychic" attack against Anka and her machine gun in the movie "Chapaev". Day after day, coming from school, I tried, again and again, filling the whole Courtyard with ding and dong, yet in vain, it sounded nothing like that roll.

The pipes were buried all too soon and my musical self-education interrupted, but the blocks on the Gorka got furnished with gas. They installed the gas stove in the kitchen and hung the white box in the wall above the sink to light the gas on when heating water to wash up or take a bath. Titan the Boiler disappeared from the bathroom, and firewood was needed no more, our basement section with Dad's workshop became roomier…

One day in early summer, when the parents were at work, I came down to our basement section and took away Dad's big ax, because I and some other boy wanted to build a fire in the forest.

We descended into the thicket behind the Bugorok-Knoll and started climbing up the next, lower, hill. On the steep slope, there stood a small Fir-tree no taller than a meter and a half. And from the moment of entering the forest with the ax in my hands, I had had an itch to put it to use. Now, there it stood before me the one-and-a-half-meter tall opportunity. A couple of blows and the Fir-tree dropped on the slope…

I was standing next to it, unable to grasp— what for? You couldn't use it for making a bow, nor even for a mock-up Kalashnikov gun to play War-Mommy. Why did I kill the Fir so aimlessly?

I no longer wanted to build any fire nor have a walk. All I needed was to get rid of the ax, the accomplice in my cruel barbarity. I took it back to the basement section, and from that time walked the woods unarmed…

> (…see? What a lovably prissy boy! Yet, the core in this pathetic self-praise thru self-chastening is true to life. However, don't run over yourself to list your Daddy among the good guys because I am too unstable for that. One day I might be as tenderhearted as you can wish, but the following one… well, I don't know…
>
> When my *bachnagh* (this term in Karabakh Armenian means "husband of a sister-in-law") was getting ready for the wedding of his eldest daughter, the relatives helped out with anything they could. Not with money though, because he wouldn't accept it— the expenses for such an occasion are born by the happy father. That's the tradition.
>
> The acceptable assistance comprises, mainly, cookery work. While the staple set of wedding chow at the city House of Celebrations is paid in cash, the standard snacks might be diversified by additional courses cooked by aunts, grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters of the immediate and distant relatives. Kinship, aka clan relations, is

verily alive and kicking in Karabakh. The culinary help in wedding preparations is a sort of love labor performed using the products purchased by the celebration organizer.

However, certain products call for preliminary treatment, and you can't but agree that slaughtering a dozen chickens on the balcony in a five-story apartment-block is a way more toilsome undertaking, than executing it at a private, albeit still under construction, house. That's why the chickens were brought to me.

They dumped them in the vast unfinished hallway and left, busy with innumerable other wedding-preparation chores. *Jedem – seiner*, quoting a popular German saying.

So, those fifteen living creatures lie in dust on the ground with their legs tied, and I am towering over them with a freshly whetted knife in my hand and all of us are fully aware of what for.

Fifteen are not a single one and there is a definite deadline when distaff clan members will come to pluck the initially processed products clean of their feathers. But each of the would-be products, while alive, has its own coloring and age, its personal point of view on what is happening, its individual reserve of energy, which determines the loudness of protestations as well as the protraction of the flutter with the already chopped off head.

You can't do such a job without being methodical. So I turned into a robot methodically repeating a set of the same movements… fifteen times…

Sometimes, I looked thru the window-opening, still lacking its frame, at a white fluffy cloud high in the blue sky... So clean... Immaculate cumulous curls…

Just so a robot with a kinda sentimental wrinkle in its program.

Since that time, my attitude to executioners has somehow changed. Probably, I understood that nothing in their nature was outside me…

Well, in a nutshell, at that wedding I was a vegetarian.

Coming back to the assertion that in the case of the Fir-tree killing the weight of guilt was on the ax, who pressed me into the destruction of the innocent plant, then there's nothing new about it, "I was carrying out the orders…"

A commonplace low-grade zombie-simulation…)

~ ~ ~

In the fifth grade, instead of just one Mistress, we had separate teachers for different subjects because our elementary education was over.

The new Class Mistress' name was Makarenko Lyubov … er… Alexeevna?…Antonovna?…I don't remember her patronymic. Between us, we called her just "Makar", yes, checks with the handle of the most popular army pistol of 12 charges.

"*Atas*! Makar is coming!" (In the school lingo "atas!" meant "beware!")

But all that came later, and for the first time, I met the would-be Class Mistress the day before school, when Mom brought me there to copy the curriculum and get acquainted with my new Class Mistress.

Makarenko asked me to help her about the class wall newspaper on a big sheet of Whatman paper, which had to be adorned with a frame for which there already was the mark of a pencil line five-centimeter offset from the edges. She gave me a brush and a box of watercolors and warned to use only the blue one before going out together with my Mom to further improve on their acquaintance.

Proud of being trusted with so important a job, I started immediately, dipped the brush in the glass of water, dampened the blue and began to paint the strip of the Whatman paper between its edge and the pencil mark, trying not to trespass it. The job turned out an up-hill one – you paint, and paint, and paint but there still remains so much to paint yet. The main problem though was that each watercolor stroke differed from others by its shade of blue, making it hard to keep the uniformly. I persevered in earnest because not every day a boy gets a chance of making frames on a sheet of Whatman. However, by the return of Mom and Mistress, I had only finished about a quarter of the frame.

The teacher said at once that was enough, even more than that because all she had wanted of me was just passing the brush along the pencil line, but now it's too late. Mom promised to bring a sheet of Whatman paper from her work, but the teacher said "no-no!" Then I came up with a proposal to mount strips of paper on glue over the superfluously painted areas, but the idea was also turned down, I didn't know why.

We left, and Mom did not rebuke me on our way home for it was not my fault if the new teacher had never in her life seen sturdy frames of plywood, but only those of thin lines as around the words of Marx and Lenin in the Regiment Club…

When school began there was a wall newspaper hanging in our classroom. Probably, I was the only schoolboy to study so carefully the blue line borders in the paper…

Nevertheless, our new Mistress retained some confidence in me and a month later entrusted with a verbal message for Seraphima Sergeevna in our former classroom.

I knocked on the familiar door and recited the message to my first teacher, who was sitting at her desk facing the new growth of first-graders. She thanked me and then asked to close the upper window leaf, thru which droughts got in whenever someone opened the door.

I readily climbed onto the windowsill and, standing on tip-toes, reached out and slammed shut the vicious leaf. The mission done and, rather than to kneel back on the sill and then lie on it with the stomach, I just jumped down on the floor. The jump turned out classy deft, and full of pride I strutted out of the silent classroom past the delight and reverence in the eyes of the small ones at their desks. How could I have thought those first-graders on a visit to my kindergarten group were so unreachably grown up? Arrogant swaggers!.

At home, we already had a TV set in which announcers read the news against the background of the Kremlin walls and towers, and hockey players rushed from one goal to the other at the European and World Championships. There were eagerly awaited for programs of Kinopanorama, and the Club of Jolly and Resourceful, and, of course, movies!

I would never have supposed that there could be a film longer than 2 sequels. The 4-sequeled "Bombard the area I'm in!" became an eye-opener. Only I did not like Italian cinema, because when Marcello Mastroianni suggested a possible abortion and I inquired what that word meant, our neighbor, auntie Paulyna, laughed out loud and Dad ordered me leave the parent's room because that movie was not meant for children…

The arms race took place not only in the TV box but in our boyish life as well. We reached the stage of using sophisticated weaponry: crook pistols, crook rifles.

There's hardly any need in a detailed explanation what a slingshot is, however, I'd like to point out that there are two types of slingshots: for shooting pebbles, and for shooting crooks.

> (…pebble-shooters are a lethal weapon, in the hungry post-war years in Stepanakert, the boys were knocking sparrows down from the trees for their meal…)

Crook-shooting slingshot is almost a toy made of aluminum wire and a round rubber band for aircraft-modeling (instead of rubber straps cut out from a gas mask for pebble shooters). The non-lethal slingshots shoot with a small piece of aluminum wire bent into a narrow arc-like crook. Catching the rubber band within the crook's bend, pull the band and let the missile go. It doesn't kill but it is felt alright, bad news if the crook hits the eye.

Now, if instead of the slingshot the round rubber band is fixed upon a piece of planed plank and you pull the crook along its even surface, the accuracy of the hit grows exponentially because the crook takes off the firm guide. The rest, cutting out of that piece of plank a sub-machine gun or a pistol, is up to you.

By the point in the plank side to which the readied crook is pulled, you add the trigger-frame of the same aluminum wire strung crosswise so as to keep the crook in place until you pull the trigger. The pressure for keeping the trigger-frame in place and holding the cocked up crook at ready originates from a common rubber band, like that in underpants, stretched taut from the trigger to the screw in the downside of the planed plank.

The boys armed with such weapons do not run about yelling “ta-ta-ta!” as in War-Mommy. They leave those naive games for kindergarten kids and go down into basements and start hunting each other in the dark. Metallic “dzink!” of a crook against the cemented floor, or the wooden walls, hints that the enemy is near and opened fire at you. But securing the position in the pit above the floor at the end of the corridor, you are as safe as in an impregnable bunker. You have to just sit tight up there and send crooks to the sound of stealthy steps, and if you hear “ouch!” from the dark, then you have targeted him okay…

In autumn, they finished construction of the five-story apartment block across the road surrounding Block. The happy tenants were moving into their flats while deep down, in the endless basement corridors of so big a building (the first of that height and size at the Object), there unfolded unprecedented combat actions with the employment of crook weapons of all types.

Initially, the huge underground basement was illuminated with electric bulbs placed rarely but evenly, they lived but a short life: long-range crook shots burst them up, one by one, into fine splinters. Perhaps, the only drawback of the crook weapons was their almost complete noiselessness. For real self-assertion, you need your arms to do some major bangs…

> (...life just cannot stand still, it has to flow. Where to? The direction conforms to the dearest dreams of those swimming in the flow, sort of…)

More and more often, the evening quietude in the Courtyard got disrupted by sharp snaps alike to gun reports because the boys had armed themselves with peelikkalkas but I, as usual, straggled behind the advanced trends in the flow of social life, which made me beg for instructions to manufacture a peelikkalka.

Take 15 cm. length of a narrow section (0.5 cm.) copper tube and bend till it resembles letter L. The foot of the resulting L is flattened with a hammer. Thru the remaining orifice, pore a small amount of molten lead into the tube to form a smooth leaden bottom by the angle to L’s foot.

Find a thick long nail reaching the leaden bottom and still sticking out from the tube for at least 5 cm. and bend the nail at 4 cm. from its head (you’ve got another L now).

Insert the nail into the tube (the contraption resembles the left bracket “[”, or right bracket “]”, depending on your point of view) and as a result, you have a working piston-cylinder shebang.

Connect the bent nail head and the flattened tube foot using a common rubber band, like that used in underpants, now the whole construction looks like a small bow and your peelikkalka is ready.

Pull the nail halfway out from the tube, the tension of the band forces the nail rest against the copper wall of the tube at the point to which you pulled the nail out.

Squeeze the peelikkalka in your palm, the band pressed to the tube makes the nail slide inside and sharply hit the leaden bottom. So much for a trial blank shot.

Now, it remains only to load the firearms, for which purpose the nail is fully taken out and the tube loaded with scrapings of sulfur from a couple of match heads.

Insert the nail back, cock it up with the band and “Hello, world!” with a live shot from your weapon. Bang!…

In the evening dark, the splash of flame shooting out from the tube orifice looks quite impressive. On the whole, it’s the same principle as in toy pistols with paper pistons, yet distinctly enhanced in decibels…

On learning the theory, I wanted to manufacture a peelikkalka of my own, but Dad did not have a copper tube of the right size at his work.

Still and all, I had it. Probably, one of the boys gave me an odd one of his.

You can't deny that in an extra-curricular way, a schoolboy gets better training for real life…

> (...never heard the “peelikkalka” word, eh?. me neither—well, outside the Object—yet the name ain’t a jot less luring than that of “derringer”...)

~ ~ ~

As concerned mainstream schooling, our class was moved to the one-story building in the lower part of the school grounds, about a hundred meters from the principal building. Apart from our classroom, the building comprised a couple of workshop rooms for Handicraft classes equipped with vices and even a lathe in one of them. Because the school curriculum had more important subjects, that room was rarely open, two or three days a week to accommodate the grades visiting our territory.

Studying in the outskirts of school grounds has lots of advantages. During the breaks, you can have crazy races in the corridor free of the risk to stumble into some patrolling teacher as is their custom in the main building.

Besides, the teachers entered our class no sooner than some self-appointed sentinel or two of ours, playing outside, would race in with the announcement which subject was heading to us from up there. And an outdoors lookout was simply the must not to be caught at bullying a socket in the classroom wall into whose holes with 220 V we stuck the legs of radio-electronic resistances. In the resulting short circuit, the resistance would burst and spew around indignant sparks of blinding flame.

> (…presently I’m just bewildered why none of us had ever got electroshocked. It seems, the mains sockets in that room were too human…)

Life was changing in our house too. The Zimins family left when Stepan was made redundant because Nikita Khrushchev, when in the position of the USSR’s Ruler, gave the West a promise of drastic cuts in the contingent of the Soviet Army reducing it to the meager twenty millions of

servicemen. Soon after that, he was made to retire, yet the new leadership kept the promise true and the reduction policies affected even our Object.

Besides the Zimins, the tenants from the apartment beneath us left also. Their grown-up daughter Julia presented us, 3 children from the upper floor, with her album of matchbox stickers collection.

At those times matchboxes were made not of cardboard with printed pictures on it, but of very thin, one-layer, plywood blanketed by taut blue tissue upon which there was mounted one or another sticker portraying the famous ballet dancer Ulanova or some sea animal, or a hero astronaut in it. People collected matchbox stickers just like the post-stamp hobbyists only, first, you had to peel them off a box soaked in water and then, of course, to dry up.

Julia's collection was split into different sections: sports, aviation, Hero Cities, and so on. Surely, all 3 of us were delighted with so generous a gift and we stepped in her shoes at keeping the picturesque hobbyhorse…

In place of Yura Zimin, another Yura became my friend who had a different family name, yet, like the previous Yura, Yura Nikolayenko was also a neighbor, more distant though, who lived not on the same landing but in the same Block.

As the snow filled the forest, we ventured out there in search of foxholes or, at least, to catch an odd hare. We had pretty good chances of success because we were joined by a Lowlander-boy who brought a dog living in the yard of their wooden house. Only he was too greedy to share the linen rope tied to the dog's collar and yanked at it himself. In the forest though, the dog began to drag him forward and backward over the snowdrifts with lots of hare footprints. Yura and I were running behind not to miss out on the moment of catching a hare.

Then we noticed that the dog was paying no attention to the hare footprints but constantly sniffing for something else. Finally, he started to excitedly dig into a tall snowdrift. Anticipating that the dog would dig out a fox burrow whose scent he nosed thru the snow, we armed ourselves with sticks to meet the beast. However, from under the snow, the dog pulled out a big old bone, and we stopped hunting…

~ ~ ~

On the winter vacations, many children of my age were invited to a neighboring corner house in the Courtyard, where some newly arrived tenants celebrated the birthday of their daughter, my future classmate. She looked like Malvina from *The Golden Key* tale, only her hair was neither blue nor curly, but straight.

After the guests finished all of the lemonade on the big table, the beautiful girl shared her memories of the place she lived before, where she was, like, Queen of the Courtyard and the boys living there were her pages, sort of…

Probably, I caught cold by the vacations end and started school later than my classmates because I could not get it what was happening the morning when I finally came to our classroom.

The lessons had not begun yet and the newcomer Malvina-like girl appeared in the doorway right after me. Like all the schoolgirls at any grade in those times, she wore the compulsory uniform in Queen-Victorian style—a dark brown dress with a white lace collar and a black apron on copious straps covering all of her shoulders.

She stepped into the room and stopped expectantly. The next moment a godawful hue and cry burst out, “The Cow of the Courtyard!”

She dropped her school bag on the floor and, wrapping her arms around her head, ran along the aisle between the desks, while everyone else—both the boys and the girls—blocked her way, hooting and yelling something in her ears, and Yura Nikolayenko ran behind her and rubbed himself at her back, like dogs do, until she sat down at her desk and dropped her face into her hands.

The mayhem ceased only when the classroom was entered by a teacher asking, “What’s going on here?”, she was perplexed no less than me.

The girl got on her feet and ran out of the classroom without even picking her schoolbag up from the floor.

The next day she never showed up and we had a class meeting attended, instead of her, by her father who was red in the face and shouting that we were a bunch of scoundrels and pinched his daughter by the chest. He demonstrated with his hands where exactly were applied the pinches.

Then our Mistress told the meeting that pioneers shouldn’t disgrace themselves by nagging their classmates so disgustingly as we did because the Malvina-like girl was also a pioneer like all of us.

And I felt ashamed even though I had not been pinching or nagging anyone. The beautiful girl never more appeared in our class, probably, she was transferred to the parallel one.

(…” the crowd is a merciless beast…”

runs a line from Avetic Isahakian’s poem about Abu-Lala, which I learned very well even before reading it…)

Individual cruelty is no less ugly as collective one. In spring I got another deep scratch when witnessing an example of maternal pedagogy.

The empty afternoon Courtyard was entered, between our house and the corner building, by a woman heading to the buildings on the opposite side. Behind her, a six-year-old girl ran and sobbed holding her arm outstretched to the women and kept repeating the same words with the voice hoarse from non-stop wailing, “Mom, gimme your hand! Mom, gimme your hand!”

The rasping shrieks somehow reminded me of Masha's screeching, when they came to slaughter her at Grandma Katya's in Konotop.

The woman never slowed down only time and again looked back to lash with a thin rod the girl's outstretched hand. The kid would respond with a somewhat louder shriek but neither withdraw her hand nor stop crying, "Mom, gimme your hand!"

They crossed the yard and went into their staircase-entrance leaving me harrowed by the unanswerable question – where could such fascist mothers be in our country from?.

~ ~ ~

Between the left wing of the school building and the tall openwork fence of timber that separated the school grounds from the surrounding forest, there were a couple or 3 beds passing for the school agronomy lot.

It's highly unlikely that the mixture of loam and withered Pine needles from several trees left within the school territory, could yield a crop of any sort. However, when our class was told come to school on Sunday for turning dirt in the agronomy lot, I dutifully showed up at the appointed hour.

The morning was overcast, so Mom even tried to talk me into staying home. Indeed, everything turned out just as she had predicted – not a single soul around. But maybe they would come yet?

I hung about the locked school for a while, then bypassed the dismal agronomy lot and went down to the one-story building of our class plus the workshop in the lower part of the school grounds.

Opposite the building, there was a squat brick warehouse with two iron gates locked as anything else in the empty school grounds whose silent stillness could even be felt as some tangible substance. However, no lock could impede climbing up to the roof of the warehouse from the steep hillock behind which made it not a big deal.

The slight slant of the lean-to roof was covered with black roofing felt. I walked around the roof square to each of its corners, then looked back at the mum school building. Still nobody. Okay, five minutes more and I'd breeze off.

At that moment the sun peeped out thru the clouds making the wait not so gloomy because I marked light, transparent, wisps of steam rising from the black roof here and there. "Aha, the sun heats it!" guessed I.

What's more, while drying up, the black felt began to develop streaks of dark-gray color, which widened, expanded, joined together and kept me enthralled with watching that gradual expansion of the solar possessions. I knew perfectly well already that no one would show up and I might just as well go home, yet let that stretch of wet roofing felt would also turn dry-gray making the Isle of Dry expand to the corner edge of the roof.

I returned home by the midday mealtime and didn't tell Mom that the sun had recruited me to the ranks of his comrades-in-arms…

End spring, Dad was going fishing out of Zona and he agreed to take me along if I provide worms for bait. I knew some lavish spots for worm-digging and brought home a whole tangle of them in a rusty tin container from canned beef.

We left very early in the morning and, near Checkpoint, 2 more men joined us with the paper permitting all the 3 to leave Zona, I was the fourth in the company but the guards didn't even notice me. Beyond the white Checkpoint gate, we turned right and went thru the forest.

We were walking, and walking, and walking and the forest never ended. At times the footpath got near the edge of the woodland but then again led us back into the wilderness.

I walked patiently because Dad had warned me even before sending after the warms there was a walk of eight kilometers, to which I hastily answered then that it was okay with me, yes, I could do that. So I just walked on, though my fishing pole and the tin can with baiting grew very heavy.

Finally, we went out to a forest lake and the fishermen told it was the Sominsky which I couldn't recognize though it was the lake where I once learned to swim. We walked along a grassy promontory by whose end there was a real raft. One of the fishermen remained on the shore, and we 3 boarded the raft that was made of logs from deciduous trees with smooth green bark, maybe, Aspen.

Dad and the other fisherman pushed the raft off, stepped onto it and kept jabbing slowly the lake bottom with long poles until we got some thirty meters away from the shore. There we stopped and began fishing.

The raft logs were not close to each other and thru the gaps between them, there were seen the openwork traverse logs drowned in the pitch-black depth, so we had to move carefully.

Our 3 fishing poles overhung 3 different sides of the raft. Fish struck pretty often though the catch was not as big as promised by the vigorous resistance to the pulled line, besides, you had to be very careful taking it off the hook because around their muzzles as well as on back fins there stuck out very prickly spikes.

Dad said it was the ruff, and the fisherman added that the ruff was the most delicious fish. Later, when we got ashore and cooked the soup in a pot hung over the fire I, of course, ate all of it but couldn't decide how delicious it was because the steaming soup was way too hot.

After the meal, the fishermen advised there was no hope of good catch anymore because at that time of day fish went sleeping. So, they stretched under the trees and slept too, the fishermen and my Dad. When everyone woke up, we slowly started back home.

Returning, we didn't take the shortcut footpath thru the forest, choosing to walk over the low hills and dales because the paper permitted to stay away till 6 in the evening.

From the top of one of the hills, we saw a small lake in the distance, it was perfectly round, rimmed by the growth of reeds. When we reached it, Dad wanted to take a swim at any rate, although the fishermen tried to talk him out of the idea. One of them told it was too often that in that round lake, called Witch's Eye, someone got drowned caught by its duckweed.

But Dad doffed his clothes, all the same, grabbed hold of the stern of a skiff by the shore and, kicking up foamy splashes, moved off to the reeds by the opposite shore. Halfway thru, he remembered the watch on his wrist, took it off and hung on a nail in the stern. When he came back in the same manner, the duckweed clung all over his shoulders in long thickly spliced garlands.

He was ashore already and putting on his clothes when we saw a woman in a long skirt of villager womenfolks, who ran across the slanted field with indistinct yells. She ran up to us but didn't say anything new and only repeated what we had heard from the fellow-fisherman.

Near Checkpoint, we were caught in a spell of bad weather and the rain thoroughly drenched us before we got home, but no one fell ill after…

~ ~ ~

With bicycles, I palled up since early childhood. I can't even remotely remember my first tricycle, but some photos confirm: here it is with the pedals on the front wheel and me, astride, a three-year-old fat little man in a closely fitting skull cap.

However, the next one I recollect pretty well—a red three-wheeler with the chain drive—because I often had to argue with my sister-'n'-brother whose turn it was to take a ride. Later, Dad reassembled it into a two-wheeler but, after my fifth grade, the bicycle became too small for me and was hand-me-downed to the younger for good.

And then Dad got somewhere a real bike for me. Yes, it was a second-hand machine but not a bike for ladies or some kind of "Eaglet" for grown-up kids.

One evening after his work, Dad even tried to teach me riding it in the Courtyard, but without his supporting hand behind the saddle, I would fall on one side if not on the other. Dad got weary of my clumsiness, he said, "Learn it yourself!" and went home.

In a couple of days, I could already ride the bike. However, I didn't get the nerve to throw my leg over the saddle and perch up properly, instead, I passed my leg thru the frame and rode standing on the pedals, which caused the bike to run askew.

But then I got ashamed seeing a boy who, though younger than me, was not afraid to race along with his bike, step onto a pedal and flung the other leg over the saddle to the second pedal. His body length did not allow to use the saddle without losing touch with the pedals so turning them

he rubbed his crotch against the frame which also served him for sitting upon with his left or right thigh, alternatively. On such a brave shortie's background, riding the bike "under the frame" was quite a shame…

And at last, after so many tries and falls ending both with and without bruises or scratches, I did it! Wow! How swiftly carried me the bike above the ground, no one would ever catch up be they even running! And—most important—riding a bicycle was such an easy thing!

I rode it non-stop driving along the concrete walks in the Courtyard, orbiting its two wooden gazebos until, a bit warily, I steered out to the road of concrete slabs surrounding the two Gorka blocks…

Later, already as an expert rider, I started mastering the bikerobatics— "no-hand riding", when you take your hands off the steer and pilot the bicycle by feeding your body weight to the side of your intended turn. And the bike understood and complied!.

Another achievement of that summer became keeping the eyes open when under the water.

The dam where I once slipped off the slab was restored to bring about a wide bathing pool which attracted numerous beach-goers.

Among us, boys, the favorite game in the water was "spotting" where the "it" should catch up with and touch anyone of the fleeing players. Your speed when walking thru the water is slower than that of fleeing swimmers so you have also to swim which reduces your visibility. Besides, a player can take a dive and sharply turn down there, so it's hard to guess where he'd re-emerge for a breather. Ever before, when plunging in the water, I firmly closed my eyes but that way you cannot catch a glimpse of flicking white heels that kick full ahead underwater.

True enough, in the ever-present yellowish twilight beneath the surface, you can't see very far, yet sounds there turn more crisp and clear if you are sitting and knock, say, two gravels against each other, possibly because the water cuts off all unrelated noises. However, you cannot sit underwater for a long time— the air in your lungs pulls you up to the surface and there's no other way to resist the upping but use your hands for counter-rawing which makes you drop the gravels…

~ ~ ~

Our parents' leaves did not coincide that summer so they went for their vacations in turn. First, Dad visited his native village of Kanino in the Ryazan Region. He took me with him there, but strictly warned beforehand that on the way I should not ever tell anyone that we lived at the Atomic Object.

At the station of Bologoye, we had a long wait for the train to Moscow. Leaving me seated on our suitcase in the station waiting room, Dad went to punch the tickets. On a nearby bench, a girl was sitting with an open book in her lap. I got up and neared the girl to look in the book over her shoulder. It was *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne.

I read a couple of paragraphs of the familiar lines I liked so much. She kept reading and didn't pay any attention to me standing behind the bench back. I wanted to speak up to her, but I did not know what to say. That that was a good book? That I had also read it?

While I was looking for the right words to say, her adults came and announced that their train was arriving. They grabbed their trunks and went out to the platform to board the train. She never looked back…

Then my Dad returned with the punched tickets. At my request, he bought me a book from a bookstall about a Hungarian boy who later became a youth and fought against the Austrian invaders to his homeland. When the ping-ponging echo from the PA loudspeaker announced the arrival of our train, we went out to the platform. A ten-or-so-year-old boy passed by.

"See?" said Dad to me. "That's what poverty is!"

I looked after the boy who walked away, and noticed the rough patches in the back of his pants…

In Moscow, we arrived the next morning. I wanted to see the Capital of our Homeland from its very beginning and kept asking when Moscow would, at last, start, until the conductor said that we were in the city already. But behind the pane in the car's window, there were running the same shabby log huts as at the stations of Valdai, only much more of them and closer to each other, and they did not want to end in any way. And only when our train pulled in under the high arc of the station roof, I believed that it was Moscow.

We went on foot to the other station which was very close. There Dad again punched the tickets but that time we had to wait until evening for the train, so he handed the suitcase over to the storage room and we boarded an excursion bus going to the Kremlin.

Inside the Kremlin walls, they warned that we shouldn't take any pictures whatsoever. Dad had to demonstrate there was no camera in the leather case hanging from his shoulder but his homemade radio which they allowed to keep, only now I had to carry it on.

There were white-walled houses in the Kremlin and dark Fir-trees, but too few, although thick-trunked and tall.

The excursion was brought to the Czar Bell with its chopped out wall. It happened when the Czar Bell fell from the belfry and couldn't ring ever since, which is a pity. And when we came to the Czar Cannon, I instantly climbed the pile of the large polished cannonballs under her nose and shoot my head into the muzzle. It looked like insides of a huge pipe with lots of dust on the circular wall.

"Whose kid is that?! Take him away!!" cried some man outside the cannon, running up from the nearest Fir-tree.

Dad admitted that I was his and, until we left the Kremlin, he had to hold me by the hand, though the day was hot.

When the bus returned to the railway station, Dad said that he needed to buy a watch, although he did not have much money. So, we entered a store where there were lots of different watches under the glass in the counter top, and Dad asked me which one to buy. Remembering his complaint that he was short of money, I pointed at the cheapest— for 7 rubles, but Dad did not accept and bought an expensive wristwatch— for 25….

In the village of Kanino, we lived in the log hut of Grandma Martha, made up of one large room with 2 windows opposite the wide-and-tall Russian stove.

Behind the hut, there was a lean-to of logs attached to it. The windowless lean-to was empty, strewn with stray wisps of old hay, and smelled of dust. There I found three books: a historical novel about the general Bagration in the war of 1812 against Napoleonic invasion, a long story of how they established the Soviet rule among the Indians in the Chukchi Peninsula chasing the Whites in dog sleds, and *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Once, my Dad's brother and sister came to visit, they both lived in the same village but were too busy at the collective farm, kolkhoz. Grandma Martha cooked a round yellow omelet for the occasion; I don't remember the meals on other days…

The village of Kanino was divided into two parts by the hollow holding a slowly rolling, broad and noiseless, creek. Its both banks were solid walls of an uninterrupted willow thicket at some places closing overhead. And the stream was pretty shallow—a little bit above the knees, with a pleasant sandy bottom. I liked to wander in its slow current.

One day Dad took me to the Mostya river. It was a very long walk but in the end, there turned up enough of a river to swim from one grassy bank to the other. There were many people on both banks too, probably, from other villages. On our way back we came across a combine harvesting wheat in the field. We stopped at the edge of the field to watch and when the harvester drove past to the other edge, Dad spat and angrily said, "Phui, hooey!"

As it turned out, the combine driver was mowing the shoots at their tops, so as to finish his job quicker, but when he saw a stranger in a white tank top together with a boy of urban appearance, he decided my Dad was some big wheel from the district administration on a recreation visit and, driving past us, he mowed the shoots close to the ground…

Near Grandma Martha's lean-to, there appeared a large haystack and when Dad together with his brother began some repair work inside her log hut, for which period Grandma Martha moved to spend nights in the lean-to, and the bed for me and Dad was made atop the haystack. Sleeping up there was convenient and pleasant because of the smell of withering grass, but a bit unusual and even scary for all the stars above watching you all the time. Besides, the roosters started crying before each dawn and then you just had to lie in the twilight before dropping off again…

One day I went up the creek, as far as another village, there was an earthen dam built by that village boys to make a pond for swimming. But after that, I fell ill and was taken to the same upstream village because only there was infirmary of 3 beds.

On one of those 3 beds, I was ill almost a whole week reading *The Standard Bearers* by Gonchar and eating the strawberry jam brought by Dad's sister, Aunt Sasha, or maybe it was his brother's wife, Aunt Anna, because they came together to see me.

So we spent Dad's vacations and returned to the Object…

~ ~ ~

Soon after our return, Mom took Sasha and Natasha with her and went on her vacations to Konotop. Again, Dad and I kept each other manly company of 2. He cooked tasty pasta soup the Navy way and explained me things about the seamen's life. For instance, on ships many commands are given by the bugle calls and those signals are not just "du-du-du-du du-du-du-du" as bleated by a pioneer bugler, when marching behind the drummer after the Pioneer Company Banner at some ceremonial line-up. The ship bugle plays a different melody for each occasion. At midday meal time the bugle sings, "Take your spoon, and your mess-tin, quickly run to the half-deck".

The mess-tin is a pot with a lid which they fill for a sailor with his grub to eat, and the half-deck is that place on the ship where the cook ladles that grub out.

Dad taught me some sea words too. "Topmast" means the highest point on a boat. When they want to play a trick on a young sailor, they usually give him a teapot and send to fetch tea from the topmast. The greenhorn unaware, of course, where it was, walks about the boat asking how to get there. The seasoned sailors direct him from one place to another or to the engine room, just for fun…

And Dad also told that some *zeks*, who spent too many years in Zona, could no longer live in freedom. Because of that one recidivist, who served his term, was pleading his Zona Chief not to let him loose but go on keeping locked up. But his Zona Chief replied, "The law is the law! Get lost!"

In the evening, the kicked-out recidivist was brought back to Zona because he killed a man in a nearby village. And the murderer was yelling, "I told you, Chief! Because of you I had to take an innocent's life!"

By those words, Dad's eyes looked sideways and up, and even the sound of his voice changed strangely…

Some books I re-read more than once, not immediately, of course, but after some time. That day I was re-reading the book of stories about revolutionary Babushkin, which I was awarded at school for assiduous studying and active participation in the public life of school. He was a common laborer and worked for rich plant owners before becoming a revolutionary…

When Dad called me for midday meal, I went to the kitchen, got seated at the table and, eating the pasta soup, shared, “And did you know, that before the October Revolution the workers at the Putilov factory once were forced to work for 40 hours at a stretch?”

To which Dad replied, “Did you know that your Mom went to Konotop with another man?”

I raised my head up from the plate. Dad was sitting in front of untouched soup and looking at the kitchen window blinds.

I got scared, cried, and shouted, “I’ll kill him!”

But Dad, still looking at the blinds, answered, “No, Sehryozha, we don’t need no killing.”

His voice sounded a little nasal as that of the recidivist murderer who wanted to stay in Zona.

Then Dad got to the Detachment’s Hospital and for two days the neighbor woman, who had moved in the rooms of the redundant Zimins, was coming to our kitchen to cook meals for me. On the third day, Mom came back together with my sister-’n’-brother…

Mom went to see Dad at the Detachment’s Hospital and took me with her. Dad came out to the yard in the pajamas to which they change all the patients there. The parents sat on a bench and told me to go and play somewhere. I walked away but not too far, and I heard as Mom was quickly telling something to Dad in a low voice.

He looked straight in front of himself and repeated the same words, “The kids will understand when they grow up.”

> (…when I grew up, I understood that some informer had sent a letter from Konotop, only that time directly to my Dad instead of the Special Department.
>
> What for? By telling on my Mom, the rat was gaining no improvement in the housing conditions nor other amelioration in their day-to-day life. Or maybe, just out of habit? Or maybe, that was not a neighbor at all?
>
> Some people, when not happy with their lives, think it will help if someone else does badly. I do not think it works, but I know that there are such thinkers.
>
> And I never asked my brother or sister about the man who went with them to Konotop that summer. Nonetheless, now I know that so it was.
>
> Mom built her defense on Dad’s frivolous behavior during his vacation the previous year, when he went alone to a Crimean sanatorium on the admission card from the trade-union. He got so light-minded there that never thought to get rid of his light-mindedness evidence, and Mom had to wash that evidence out from his underpants in the washing machine “Oka”…)

Then Dad left the Hospital and we started to live on further…

~ ~ ~

At school, our sixth grade was moved back onto the second floor in the main building. Because of uninterrupted book-reading and watching the television I had no time for home assignments but still remained a “good learner” just out of teachers’ inertia.

In the school public life, I played the role of a horse in the performance staged by the pioneers of our school. The role was assigned to me because Dad made a big horse head from cardboard and on stage I represented the horse’s head and forelegs. My arms and shoulders were hidden under a large colorful shawl, which also covered one more boy who crouched behind me gripping my belt because he played the role of hinder-parts.

The horse did not say anything on stage and appeared there only as the nightmare to scare an idler in his sleep and make him reform and study well. We performed in the school gym, and in the Regiment Club, and even went on a tour out of Zona—to the club of Pistovo village. Everywhere, the appearance of the horse sparked vivacity among the audience…

Besides the movies at the Regiment Club, I sometimes went to the House of Officers, asking the ticket money from my parents. It was there that I watched the French adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* for the first time.

Before the show, ominous rumors circulated in the thick confluence filling the foyer hall, people murmured that they failed to bring the film and would show some other flicks instead, so as to keep money for the sold tickets. I draw aside from the crowd ruminating the ugly hearsay and, to kick devastatingly grim contemplation, I...

> (...being that I, the one from that period, I knew no Eddy Murphy yet and believed, in earnest, that we single-handedly defeated Germany in WWII because our Soviet people are always ready to die for out Soviet Motherland at a moment’s notice and without any second thought whatsoever...)

... sought shelter in the concentrated consideration of the huge portrait of Marshal Malinovsky screening half the foyer side wall by all the screwed, and pinned, and dangling items in the exhibition of his orders and medals. The collection was really enormous leaving no vacant spot on his ceremonial tunic where the medals of lesser denomination were hanging below the waist, from the groins, a kinda over-all coat of mail.

And I swore to the chain-mailed marshal, I wouldn’t watch anything else even if they did not give the money back. But it turned a false alarm and the happiness, lavishly spiced by the sound of ringing swords, lasted the whole 2 sequels, and in color too!.

The exploration of the Detachment’s Library was regularly bringing new achievements. Not only that I had long ceased to be frightened by the pictures in the wide anteroom, but I also became a seasoned shelf-hanger.

As the shelving of books crowded quite close to each other, I got the hang of climbing right up to the ceiling for which purpose the shelves both sides of the narrow passages became, like, convenient ladder-rungs. I wouldn't say that on the previously unreachable shelves there were some special books, not at all, however, the acquired skills at mountaineering increased my self-esteem like after that occasion when Natasha called me from my sofa-readings because there was an owl in the basement of the corner building.

Of course, I immediately ran after her. The basement corridor was illuminated by a single bulb that somehow managed to survive the harsh times of the crook wars. At the end of the corridor under the opening to the outside pit, there sat a large bird on the floor, much bigger than an owl. Some real eagle owl it was who angrily shook his eared head with the crooked nose, no wonder that the kids did not dare approach.

My reaction was surprisingly deft, without a moment's hesitation, as if handling maverick eagle owls was my daily routine, I took my shirt off and threw it over the bird's head. Then, grabbing at the clawed legs, I lifted the bird from the floor. The owl didn't resist under the cover of my tartan shirt. Where to now? Of course, I took it home, especially since I was not fully clad.

Mom didn't agree to keep such a big monster at home although our neighbors, the Savkins, had a hefty crow in their apartment. Mom answered that Grandmother Savkin's main job was wiping up the crow guano all over their apartment all day long, and who would do it in ours with all of us at work and school?

Reluctantly, I promised to take the eagle owl to Living Nature Room at school next morning because there already lived a squirrel and a hedgehog in their cages. Till then, he was allowed to sit in the bathroom. For the eagle owl's refreshment, I took a slice of bread to the bathroom and a saucer full of milk. He gravely sat in the corner and did not even look at the food on the floor tiles. Going out, I turned the light off, in the hope that, being a night predator, he'd find it even in the dark.

First thing in the morning, I checked and saw that the eagle owl hadn't pecked a crumble of his supper. He also partook none of it while I had breakfast though the light in the bathroom was left on for the purpose. So, I clutched his bare legs and carried him to school.

Probably, owls do not like hanging upside down because that eagle owl constantly tried to bend his head up as far as his neck let it go. At times, I gave my schoolbag to my brother and carried the bird with both hands in the normal position. When from the hillock top opened the distant view of school, the owl's head dropped and I realized that he was dead. I felt even relieved that he wouldn't have to live in the captivity of the smelly Living Nature Room.

I veered from the path and hid him in a shrub because once I saw a hawk hanged from a thick bough in the old tree atop the Bugorok-Knoll. I didn't want them to feather or somehow mutilate my owl, even though dead as he was…

Later, Mom said that the bird died, probably, of old age that's why he sought refuge in the basement.

(…but I think all that happened so that we would meet each other. He was a messenger to me, it's only that I haven't understood the message yet... Birds are not just birds and ancient augurs knew that well…

My house in Stepanakert is located on the slope of a deep ravine behind the Maternity Hospital. It's the last house in a dead-end, a very quiet place indeed.

Once, coming home, I saw a small bird, the size of a sparrow, in the withered late-autumn grass by the footpath. In fumbling unsteady steps, it trailed thru the brittle grass as if severely wounded, dragging the wings in its wake.

I gave it a passing look and went on, burdened by too many problems of my own... The next day I learned that right about that moment a young man was butchered a little deeper in the ravine in a brawl of junkie bros.

That small bird was the soul of the murdered and there's no chance to make me step back from this belief…)

~ ~ ~

In the autumn following the separately spent summer vacations, the senior part of our family became fans of mushroom harvesting.

Of course, the mushrooms at the Object were always there, just take a couple of steps to any side away from the trodden school path and there's russula growth for you, or solid portabella, long-legged enoki, or oily agarics, it's only that too busy passers-by had no time for mushrooms... But when they give you the permit paper to get out the Zona for a whole Sunday and also provide a truck to take the mushroom-pickers to the out-of-Zona woodland, the "noiseless hunting" takes on much more attractive looks. Probably, all those conveniences were always there for the Object dwellers, only my parents did not use them until they needed a firmer reconciliation after the split-up summer.

(…though I did not think about such things at that time and was just all too happy to go with my parents to the forest for mushroom harvesting which term is more correct than "looking for". However hard you look for, there's no way you'll find it, even before your very nose, until it calls you. Without the call you pass not seeing – it waits for someone else. It took me a life to understand it's not about mushrooms only but any not-living (Ha!) inorganic thing…)

Especially for those Sundays, Dad made three pails of sturdy cardboard, lightweight and capacious. In the forest, the mushroom-pickers from the Zona parted and wandered everyone by themselves at times exchanging distant echoes of "ahoy!" by which you couldn't guess who it was.

I liked alerted roaming in the silent autumn forest wet from the drizzle and fog. Of course, we didn't pick too brittle russulas, but portabella or agarics were a good find. Dad made a small

knife for each of us, so as not to spoil the mycelium, besides, on the cut, it's seen at once whether the mushroom had worms.

The best sort of the mushrooms were "the whites", or porcini, but I never came across any of them. The unfamiliar ones I took to Dad, and he explained that those were shiitake, or morels or simply poisonous throwaways.

At home, the mushrooms were poured from the pails into a big washing basin and kept overnight in the water, then Mom cooked or marinated them. All that was delicious, no doubt, but hunting them in the woods gave more delights…

One Sunday when the parents went on a visit somewhere, the three of us started chasing each other all over the apartment, just for fun. The merrymaking was cut short by a sharp knock at the door. On the landing, there stood the new neighbor from the first floor who said that our parents' absence was not a reason to kick up such a bedlam and, when back, they'd be informed we couldn't behave if left alone.

Later in the evening, Natasha ran in from the landing with the alert alarm: the parents were coming home already but stopped on the first floor by the neighbors from the apartment under ours. Oh-oh, we're going to get hell!

How come she was at the right time in the right place? Quite easy. The landing was, like, the apartment's extension wide for us to play balloon-volleyball, and Mom even started to use it as a gym, going out there in the evenings, when she was not at work, to jump a skipping rope. We followed her example, but I wasn't as good at it as Natasha who practiced much oftener, and so she did at the moment of our parents' intercepted return.

When they entered the hallway, Dad's face was very angry. Without taking off his coat, he headed to the kitchen and brought a stool to the parents' room, where he moved the rug aside and smashed the stool against the floor. "Keep quiet, eh?!" shouted he to the floorboards and squarely banged them once again with the stool's seat, "Is it okay now?"

I realized that we would not be punished, but something still was somehow not right….

When leaving for school, we took along the sandwiches wrapped by Mom in newspaper sheets so that during a break we would take them out of our schoolbags and eat. For Sasha and Natasha, she put two sandwiches in one package because they studied in the same class. And before leaving for school, we also had breakfast in the kitchen.

However, on that particular Saturday, I left without my schoolbag and alone because that day the senior students were having a military game for which reason the classes for junior schoolchildren were canceled.

The game participants belonged to the competing groups of "the Blues" and "the Greens", and for the start, they were to march into the forest in different directions. Their goal was to track down the opponent forces, surprise them, and capture their banner. Each trooper had to wear

paper shoulder straps whose color indicated the group they were from. A gamester with one shoulder strap torn off became a prisoner of war while missing both meant they were "killed"…

That morning, I came to the kitchen late for breakfast because normally I got up wakened by the rise of the younger ones, but they enjoyed their day-off at the moment. Secondly, the previous night till late I kept sewing the shoulder straps onto my jacket with tiny, frequent, diligent stitches so that they would sit close to hinder tearing them off because of which military preparations I went to bed about midnight…

Now Mom was already leaving for her work and said there remained some pasta cooked for the previous day dinner or, if so be my wish, I could boil an egg for my breakfast.

I reminded her that I knew nothing about cooking eggs, but she answered it was as easy as pie: to have a soft-boiled egg you boil it for a minute and a half while three-minute boiling makes it hard-boiled. She even brought the alarm-clock from their room and put it on the windowsill next to the mushroom jar before taking a hurried leave…

Such three-liter jars were kept in almost every kitchen at the Object and they were filled with a mushroom that had nothing to do with the forest. It looked like some greenish slime upon the water in the jar and, in spite of the ugly looks, it turned the water into a tasty drink reminiscent of effervescent *kvass,* even though they called its producer 'tea'-mushroom. When the jar contents neared their end with the mushroom wisps scratching the bottom, the jar was simply refilled with water and put aside for a couple of days to prepare the drink again. Women were gladly sharing pieces of the mushroom among themselves because when grown too thick it left no room for refilling the jar.

So, marking the time by the alarm clock next to the mushroom jar, I poured water into the small pan indicated by Mom before leaving, loaded it with an egg, lit the bluish springy fire in the gas stove and put the pan on it…

After exactly a minute and a half of waiting, the water around the egg did not look like being hot, so I decided, okay, let it be a hard-boiled egg. Additional one-and-a-half minutes past, some scanty vapors did start to rise from the pan, besides, the pan's walls underwater developed lots of small bubbles, and I turned the gas off because I had exact instructions on how to cook boiled eggs…

> (…the byword about the first pancake in the batch turning out a sorry lump can be safely expanded with "the first boiled egg is a slushy mess"…)

The military game participants were mostly in sportswear and noticeably reluctant to enter the school building. So all of us crowded together in the yard idling the time in small separate groups. In the one I was with, everybody appreciated the minuscule stitches that kept my shoulder straps in place. I proudly patted the one on my left shoulder—no way to grab at it, eh? Nothing like by those boys who fixed theirs by just a couple of stitches and now their shoulder straps stuck out like a cat's arced back asking to be torn off with just your pinky finger.

At that moment some unfamiliar boy, maybe from the parallel class, started a scrap. He spread me on the ground and tore my shoulder straps in tatters.

(…I never knew how to fight, neither do I now.

Most likely, I just called him "fool!" and ran away into the forest—back home…)

In the forest, I took my jacket off... Instead of the shoulder straps, there only remained a dashed, serrated, frame-like paper-strip under the tight close stitches by a doubled black thread.

I plucked the paper scraps out and scattered over the fallen foliage. Maybe, I even cried full of resentment at being killed so unruly, prematurely, before the start of combat actions, shattering my eager dreams to capture the adversary headquarters…

For some period, my favorite pastime at classes became producing blueprint drawings of my secret shelter located in a cave inside a mighty impenetrable cliff like that one lived by people in *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne. Yet, unlike their case, you could get to my cave only by the underground passage which began far from the cliff, in the depths of the surrounding forest. Well, and the cave itself had an additional passage upward, into a smaller cavity equipped with narrow crevices in the wall to peek out and see what's going on around…

A grim mask alike to those stone idols in the Easter Island decorated the butt-end of the pencil which I drew my designs with... The skill of pencil carving was also obtained at school, it's as easy as pie and all you needed was a razor blade.

At the pencil's butt-end, scrape 2 lengthwise parallel grooves, about 1 centimeter long, 3 mm wide and 2 mm apart to produce the ridge of the would-be nose. Connect the grooves with a deep cross cut to mark off the nose tip.

Now, from about a centimeter down the nose start a wider scrape towards the cross-cut, it makes the nose stick out and also becomes the lower part of the face. The notch across that wider scrape passes for a thin-lipped mouth, and two short slits, one in each of the long grooves on both sides of the nose, are the idol's eyes.

Just be careful about the razor blade, it's horribly sharp and would cut your finger pads at once if wielded inattentively… The instrument for carving was picked up, as needed, from the tiny blue-paper pack of razors kept by Dad in the bathroom. The blue top bore the brand-name "Neva" and the neat drawing of a black sailboat above it. Each razor in the pack was wrapped in a separate blue envelope embellished with the same sailboat and inscription…

When the winter sat in, the skin on my hands began to peel off. At first, there formed some small spots of dry skin and, when rubbed and pulled at, it would go off in patches. I didn't tell anyone about it and in a week took off all of the skin there, like a pair of tattered gloves, up to the wrists. Only the palms' skin remained in place. And beneath the peeled off patches, there was new skin already…

(…I have no idea if there is some scientific explanation for such a case, yet, in my humble opinion, the phenomenon was caused by the book which I met on the shelves of the Detachment's Library titled *The Man Is Changing His Skin*. I never borrowed nor skimmed it but the title was remembered and, being an impressionable child, I checked the possibility of the announced change…)

Both naivety and impressionability were my innate Achilles' heels... Impressed by a record on a 33 RPM disc, I felt a naive desire to write down the lyrics of the song, although it was in a foreign language.

My attempt at copying never went further than the first line of which result I also had rather grave doubts. Played once, the line distinctly sounded as "azza latsmaderi", yet at the following audition it somehow turned into "esso dazmaderi" and no matter how long I listened to the record those variants elusively substituted each other impeding a clear-cut decision. But it's not possible for a recorded disc to swap the words on the fly! Anyway, the project was derailed.

(…many years later I heard the song again and readily recognized when Louis Armstrong sang up from a laser disk:

" Yes, sir, that's my lady…)

The skating rink across the road was from the very start meant for playing hockey. Over time, it got bounded with compact plank fencing, and two hockey goals popped up at the field's opposite ends.

After snowfalls, the boys cleared the field with a pair of wide metal sheets resembling the bulldozer blade. Each shield had a long horizontal handle above it and no less than two or three boys were needed to push the contraption.

The snow was moved to the fence opposite the locker-room shed and shoved out of the field with large snow shovels of plywood. That's why behind that fence there accumulated a tall snow ridge all along the ice rink. Those artificial hills of snow were burrowed by boys and became an ever-growing system of tunnels with ramifications, dead ends and stuff as if following the blueprint drawings of my secret shelter.

In the evenings, we played Hide-and-seek in those tunnels full of the ink-black darkness because the lamp posts were only put along the fence on the locker-room side of the ice rink. But when you switched a flashlight inside a burrow there jumped up white glacial walls holding numberless sparks in their murky depth…

~ ~ ~

The year was ending. In the tear-off calendar on the kitchen wall by the window, there remained but a few palm-sized pages. Such tear-off calendars contained as many pages as there were days in their year and initially the thick mass of hundreds of pages squeezed by its glistening tin spine had a look of solid importance. Each page bore its unique date in bold and, in regular type-set, it

informed of the exact time both sunrise and sunset on that particular day as well as symbols and numbers showing the current phase of the moon, and all that compactly printed wealth of information was meant to be torn off and thrown away to keep pace with the time flow. To make the loss still bitter, together with the information the page's visual design was also condemned to annihilation. The data on the movements of celestial bodies were placed at the page bottom keeping its center for the portrait of one or another Member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who was born on that day, and if all Members missed being born on that day, there was a portrait of this or that hero of the Civil War or of the Great Patriotic War. On the reverse side, you could read their biography, but briefly because of the petit page size. Once in 2 months, you could come across a crossword in the calendar (yes, cues on their back), besides, there were four dates printed in red because they were holidays: the New Year, May Day, the Great October Revolution Day, and the Constitution Day.

However, later Mom started to buy tear-off calendars for women, where instead of Members' portraits there were pictures of Birch-trees upfront and the sewing patterns on the page back, or recipes for pies, and other useful tips.

From one of those tips, I learned how to wean your husband from his propensity for spirits:

> "Pour a quantity of pulverized burnt cork into a glass of wine and treat your husband to it before the guests' arrival. When all got together, the burnt cork will demonstrate its impact making the carouser unable to restrain the pressure of gases in his stomach and he'll start to fart and feel ashamed before the guests which embarrassment will make him abandon the disgraceful habit."

I shared the method to Mom because at times she scolded Dad for his propensity. However, Mom was reluctant to use the advice.

> (..I couldn't understand her then – why to complain if you don't want to eliminate the cause of discomfort?
>
> Coming of age I understood my Mom, but now I cannot understand those who could print such idiocy.
>
> See? My comprehension works like that crane from a fable wallowing in a marsh mire who pulls his neck out free, but a wing gets bogged down, the wing is out—oops!—a leg got stuck.
>
> Or is it about my comprehension only?..)

A week before the winter holidays Class Mistress announced that at the school New Year Eve Party would also be the contest for the best fancy dress so our class should do our best to win it. I was thrilled by the task at hand and right away conceived the idea of an unbeatable carnival dress – no bears or robots anymore, I'd dress up like a gypsy girl! Mom laughed when I shared my plan, yet promised to help because she had connections at the Dancing Amateur Activities…

At my cautious inquiries in the class—what disguise did they intend for the contest?—the boys invariably answered that no one cared about making any fancy dress and they would attend the party in their casual wear. The dismal prospect distressed me not a little because at a New Year party everything should be as in the movie “The Carnival Night” with streamers flying crisscross thru the snowfall of confetti... I sought consolation in a soothing thought that it was silly panicking just like before “The Three Musketeers” which show did take place, after all. Well, and if the boys had no intention of wearing fancy dresses, then there remained other guys especially from the senior classes who you could rely on…

Mom made me a mask like that of Mr. X in the movie “Mr. X”, also of black velvet only she added black gauze strip hung down over the lips. Now, no one would recognize me because from the Dancing Amateur Activities Mom brought a real wig with a long black braid reaching to the waist, a red skirt, a fine blouse and a black shawl with big red flowers.

After I changed into all those things, Mom and her new woman-friend who moved into the Zimins’ rooms laughed themselves to tears. Then they said, what if someone invited me to dance? I had to have some practice beforehand. On their advice, I picked up a chair and slowly span keeping it hugged under a waltz record. They laughed even more and said I needed female shoes, my boots did not suit the red skirt. The shoes were also found but they had high heels because you couldn’t wear sandals in winter. Walking on high heels was more than uncomfortable but Mom said, “Practice your patience, Cossack, and get trained while the time allows”.

One hour before the New Year party, my carnival costume was packed in a large bag, and off I went to school thru the dark night forest.

At school, I sneaked up to the second floor, where even the light was not turned on, and in one of the dark classrooms, I changed into my fancy dress. Descending to the first floor, I held onto the railing because walking in high-heel shoes was no better than having skates on your feet.

Both the vestibule and the first-floor corridors were lighted rather scantily, yet there was enough illumination to see that everyone, including the guys from senior classes, wore, albeit not the school uniform, yet nothing like carnival costumes.

They all stood in small groups or ran back and forth and fell silent when I clap-clapped the shoe heels past them over the parquet flooring, then over the tiles of the vestibule and the following parquet in the next corridor. And where was the celebration then? Where were the streamers and confetti?.

A couple of senior boys talked in a whisper to each other and approached me, “Could you tell the future, gypsy girl?”

At that moment School Pioneer Leader appeared and took me with her to the gym. The hall was crowded with rows of seats up to the New Year Tree and farther back on both sides of it to accommodate the audience for the performance of a prepared play. So, all my waltzing that chair at home was just useless, the school New Year party program foresaw no dancing whatsoever.

School Pioneer Leader seated me in the first row facing the still closed blue curtains. Then she left briefly and brought a masked girl in a Harlequin suit—another stupid fool like me. The girl was placed in the chair next to me, and we were the only mummers in the gym.

The curtain fell open and the ninth-graders presented their production of *Cinderella*. They had good costumes though, I especially liked the tartan cap of the Jester… The performance ended, everyone started to clap and I realized that now even the Jester would change into his pants and jacket.

I left the gym and went upstairs to the dark classroom, where I had left my clothes, and changed back. What a bliss it was to get rid of the hatefully painful high-heel shoes and get into my long-longed-for felt boots!

Exiting the school, I met my Mom and Natasha who came to admire my masquerade triumph. I shortly warned them that there was no carnival, and we went home thru the same night forest.

> (…the trick for being happy all the time is pretty simple: avoid looking back and let the memory do its job quickly – it will forget and erase your blunders, sorrows, and pains. Just keep looking forward to pleasures, successes, and holidays…)

~ ~ ~

Though the New Year celebration party fell so flat, ahead still was the long winter vacations with seventeen TV sequels of “Captain Tankesh” where he’d ride his swift horse, and swash his saber, and make fools of the Austrian occupants of his Hungarian Motherland.

In the parents’ room, as always, the Christmas Tree was touching the ceiling with the ruby star on its top, and among the shiny decorations there also hung chocolate candies “Batons” and “Bear Cub in the Forest”. After the lead-balloon carnival, life smiled again…

On the New Year Eve, Dad worked the night shift so that the garland lights would not fade in the Christmas trees in homes at the Object. And on the first morning of the New Year, Mom left for her work so that water would flow steadily from the kitchen taps…

That morning I woke late when Dad was already home from work. He asked who visited the previous night, and I answered that Mom’s new woman-friend from the former Zimins’ rooms came for quite a minute.

Then I read, went to the rink, played hockey in felt boots and came back again to the books on the big sofa… I was watching the concert of Maya Kristalinskaya on the TV in the usual wide kerchief around her neck—to hide the traces of her personal life drama—when Mom came from work. I ran from the parents’ room to the hallway, and Dad was already there from the kitchen.

He stood in front of my Mom, who had not yet had time to take her coat off. Then, while they stood, oddly still and silent, facing each other, something ungraspable happened to Dad’s hand,

which, as if the only moving part in their frozen confrontation, broke the stillness by an awkward short slap against each of Mom's cheeks.

Mom said, "Kolya! What's that?" and she burst into tears which I had never seen.

Dad started yelling and demonstrating a saucer with cigarette butts which he found behind the blind on the windowsill in the kitchen. Mom tried to say something about her woman-friend neighbor, but Dad rebuffed in a loud voice that Belomor-Canal cigarettes were not a women's smoke. He flung his sheepskin overcoat on and, before getting out, yelled, "But you swore to never ever even shit within a mile off him!"

The door slammed furiously, Mom went to the kitchen and then across the landing to her new woman-friend in the former Zimins' rooms. I put on my coat and felt boots, and went to the rink again. On my way I met my sister-'n'-brother coming back home, I did not say anything to them about what happened there.

At the rink, I was hanging around until full dark. I had no wish to play, neither wanted to go back home, so I just milled about aimlessly or sat by the stove in the shed.

Then Natasha came up to me on the ice empty of anyone already, she said that Mom and my brother were waiting for me on the road and that at home Dad dumped the Christmas Tree on the floor and kicked Sasha, and now we were going to sleepover at some acquaintances'.

Under the desolate light of lamps above the empty road, the 4 of us walked to the five-story building, where Mom knocked on the door to an apartment on the first door. There lived the family of some officer with two children, I knew the boy from the school, but not his sister, who was from a too senior grade.

Mom shared some sandwiches she brought along, but I did not feel like eating. She went to sleep together with my sister-'n'-brother on the folding coach, and I was bedded on the carpet next to the bookcase. Thru its glass doors, I saw *The Captain Dare-Devil* by Louis Bussenard and asked for permission to read it, while the light from the kitchen was reaching the carpet…

In the morning, we left and crossed the Courtyard to one of the corner buildings, I knew that it was the hostel for officers though I never had entered it. In the long corridor on the second floor, Mom told us to wait because she needed to talk with the man whose name she mentioned but I've forgotten it entirely.

For some time, the 3 of us waited silently on the landing, then Mom showed up in the corridor and led us home. She opened the door with her key. From the hallway, thru the open door to the parents' room, the Christmas tree was seen dropped on its side by the balcony door, splinters of smashed decorations scattered the carpet around it.

The wardrobe stood with its doors ajar, and in front of it there was a soft mound of Mom's clothes, each one ripped from top to bottom…

Dad was away from home for a whole week, but then Natasha said that he was coming back and so it happened the following day. And we started to live on further again…

~ ~ ~

When the vacations ended, I found a newspaper package in my schoolbag, the uneaten sandwich stayed there from the last school day in the previous term. The rotten ham imparted the schoolbag a putrid stench. Mom washed it from within with soap and the fetor got weaker but still stayed…

At school, they held the contest between the pioneer grades at collecting waste paper.

After classes, the pioneers from our class, in groups of threes or fours, visited the houses of Block and the five-story buildings, knocked on doors, and asked if they had some waste paper. At times, they presented us with huge piles of old newspapers and magazines, but I never went to the corner building housing the hostel for officers. Instead, I proposed my group of pioneer collectors to visit the Detachment's Library, where they gave us a sizable score of books. Some of them were pretty worn and tattered but others quite fresh as, for instance, *The last of Mohicans* by Fennimore Cooper with nice engraving pictures which only missed some 10 pages at the end….

One evening, when we were playing Hide-and-seek in the snow burrows along the far side of the ice rink, some senior boy said that he could lift five people at once, and easily too, with just one hand. It seemed so improbable that I bet. He only warned that the five people should lie down in a compact group for him to grip conveniently.

So, he and I, as opponents, and a few more boys went towards the Bugorok-Knoll beyond the light of lamps illuminating the rink and found a level spot.

I lay down on my back in the snow and, following his instructions, stretched out my arms and legs, for the four boys to lie upon them: one boy on each, all in all, five people.

Yet, he never tried to lift us. I felt fingers of a stranger unbuttoning my pants and entering my underwear. Unable to break loose from under the four boys who pinned me to the ground, I only yelled and shouted them to get off and let me go.

Then suddenly I felt free because they all ran away. I buttoned my pants up and went home angry with myself that I could so easily be fooled. Scored one more visit to the topmast with a teapot.

> (…and only quite recently it suddenly dawned on me that it was not a practical joke as with "showing Moscow". It was the check to verify suspicions aroused by my fancy dress at the New Year party.
>
> However ridiculous it seems, it took almost a whole life span until I guessed what's what.

And here lies the third but, probably, the most cardinal of my Achilles' heels – belated grasping…)

On the way from school, my friend Yura Nikolayenko broke the news of the caricature they sketched my Mom in and pinned to the stand by the House of Officers. In that picture, she was tossing: to go to her husband or her lover?

I uttered not a word to answer but for more than a month, I couldn't go anywhere near the House of Officers. Then, of course, I had to visit it because they showed "The Iron Mask" with Jean Marais in the role of D'Artagnan.

Before the show, with all my innards tightly squeezed by shame and fear, I sneaked to the stand, but the Whatman sheet pinned in it already bore a new caricature of a drunken truck driver in a green padded jacket, and his wife with children shedding blue tears at home.

(…it was unlimited relief at that moment, yet, for some reason, until now I can too vividly recall the caricature of my Mom which I have never seen.

She's got a sharp nose in it, and long red fingernails while tossing – to which of the two?

No, Yura Nikolayenko did not describe the picture for me, he only retold the inscription…)

In early spring, Dad came home very upset after a meeting at his work. There was another wave of the redundancy purge and at that meeting, they said who else to make redundant if not him?

So, we started to pack things up for loading them into a big iron railway container, as other redundant people before us. However, the actual loading was done by Dad alone because the 4 of us left 2 weeks earlier…

On the eve of our departure, I was sitting on a couch in the room of the Mom's new woman-friend across the landing. The woman and Mom left for the kitchen, and I stayed back with a thick book which I picked up from the piles of waste paper at the Detachment's Library and later presented to Mom's woman-friend.

Turning pages with the biography of some ante-revolution writer, I idly looked thru the seldom inset illustrations with photographic pictures of unknown people in strange clothes from another, alien, world. Then I opened the thick volume somewhere in the middle and inscribed on the page margin, "we are leaving."

That moment, I remembered the principle of creating animated cartoons: if on several subsequent pages you spell some word—a letter per page—and then bend the pages and release them one by one so that they quickly flip one after another, then letters will form up the word you wrote.

And I inscribed separate letters in the corners of subsequent pages, “I-S-e-h-r-g-u-e-y-O-g-o-l-t-s-o-f-f-a-m-l-e-a-v-i-n-g.”

Yet, the cartoon did not work out as supposed. In fact, it did not work at all, but I did not care. I just slammed the book, left it on the couch, and walked away across the landing to a room with packs of things lined under its walls…

Early in the morning, a bus left the Courtyard for the station of Valdai. Besides the 4 of us, there were a couple of families going on their vacations. When the bus turned to the road of concrete slabs descending from Block, Mom suddenly asked me who we would better live with: my Dad, or the man whose name I absolutely do not remember.

“Mom! We do not need anyone! I will work, I’ll be helping you,” said I.

She answered by silence... And those were not just words, I believed in what I was saying, yet Mom was versed in the labor legislation better than me…

Down, at the foot of the Gorka, the bus stopped by the turn to the Pumping Station and Checkpoint. The man about who Mom had just asked me, climbed in. He approached her, took her hand, telling something in a low voice. I turned away to look out of the window... He left the bus, it slammed its door and drove on. In a couple of minutes the bus pulled up at the white gate of Checkpoint. The guards checked us and the vacationers and opened the gate letting the bus out of the Zona.

A black-haired soldier grabbed hold of a white-paint-coated rod in the gate’s grate while floating by behind the glass in the bus window.

I realized with absolute clarity that never again would I ever see the familiar gate of the Zona, neither that unknown soldier next to it, however, one thing I didn’t know yet... It was my way of leaving childhood.

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~~~ The Adolescence

(…and, probably, that’s it. Enough is enough. It is time to roll the potatoes out from among the glowing ashes before they turned firebrands too. Yes, they told me that coals are crammed up with kilocalories, still I am not quite sure about the taste of those critters. Besides, it’s getting pretty dark and I’d rather not overeat at so late an hour. “And leave your dinner”, said some sage dietitian, “to your enemy”. Which is a pretty useless piece of wisdom in my case. Where could I possibly get them those enemies at all? I've been raised and carefully formatted for life in a society where each man is a friend, a comrade, and a brother to any other man…
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Damn, but it's so tempting to share the bullshit you once were fed with (and in ladlefuls too!) up to your ears. So, one day I poured a podcast homily to your step-sister, Lenochka, like, being good and kind is the innate feature of mankind at large, regrettably obscured by their ignorance of how immensely good they are deep inside, a sad pity!

She listened silently and same night my perversive stars flogged me Shakespeare's "Richard III" on TV. What a treat! She stuck in the tube and watched, mesmerized, how all those good and kind people (sadly, uninformed of their hidden goodness) were strangling and shredding each other and cutting throats for a change. And sure enough, the next morning she watched the rerun too because Shakespeare isn't a knickknack you can give the shake, it's classic. Since then, my political line regarding the TV is that of armed neutrality.

Well, so much to emphasize the fact that, if I chance to come across an accidental enemy, I'd sooner give them my last shirt but not my dinner, moreover, the potatoes baked in the fire ashes.

The moment you break their charred crust and pour a pinch of salt into the steamy core, you see the light of Truth that no oysters, nor lobsters, nor any other fancy kulebyaki can hold a candle to them. Oh, no! Not a chance.

For their sake, all freaky nourishment leave willingly I to abstruse gourmets 'cause we, uncouth and simple-minded garlic eaters, have no use for neither calipash nor calipee – nope! Our modest goal is an ample simple grub and plum dough, we're not after excessive luxuries.

And were I a younger man but not a Negro advanced in my years and pressed by all kinds of problems which the struggle for life brims with, then to them, and them only, would I dedicate an ode of love and gratitude—to potatoes baked midst the fire ashes.

No wonder, that in the most poignant episode in all the pulp fiction series by Julian Semenov, his main protagonist Stirlitz, aka Soviet secret service agent Isayev, turns up the sleeves of his spiffy Fascist uniform and bakes potatoes in the fireplace of his Berlin apartment to celebrate the Soviet Army and Navy Day.

However, with all due admiration at his culinary patriotism, no, sir, dat's ain't da thin'. To really enjoy the taste of baked potatoes, you need to sit on the ground, under the open sky, with an evening like this one here around you…)

In Konotop, Grandma Katya kissed us all, in turn, confusedly, in her kitchen, and cried. So

Mother started comforting her and talking out of snivel, before she noticed two kids' heads that peeked from behind the door to the room and asked if they were her sister's children.

“Yes, here we have our Irochka and Valerik. So big kids already. The girl is 3 years old and he will soon be 2.”

When their father, Uncle Tolik, came home from his work, I for the first time saw, not in a movie but in real life, a man with a bald patch extending from the forehead to the back of his head, however, I tried not to ogle too obviously. An hour later he and I went out to meet my Aunt Lyouda. The food store she worked at closed at seven and, coming home, she always carried bags of chow from work.

Walking by the side of Uncle Tolik, I marked the way to the Underpass, which Konotopers were calling Overpass... Some vague recollection retained a long wait in front of a railway barrier, lowered to block off the overpass made of smeared wooden sleepers bridging the gaps between the rail-heads, then the barrier went up stirring agitated commotion in a ruck of people, who rushed from both sides to cross the railway, a couple of horse drawn *telega*-carts and an odd truck in their midst... That time we were going from Konotop to the Object… In my absence, they built a deep concrete tunnel under the multi-track railway, hence the official name—Underpass—but folks still named it the way they used to—Overpass…

On the other side of the Under-Overpass, long red streetcars were running from City to the Station and back. The Konotop’s central part named “City” was never defined officially so that Konotopers could entertain different ideas about the area’s size and borders but the Station, located within the City limits, did not belong to City, which subtleties I still had to learn.

Before Aunt Lyouda arrived by one of the streetcars from City, Uncle Tolik talked me into coming up to her under the rare lamps over the tilt into the tunnel of Under-Overpass, but he would keep out of sight, and I had to grab one of her bags and ask in a husky voice: “Not too heavy for you, eh?” But she recognized me even though Uncle Tolik had pulled the peak of my cap down to hide my eyes.

The 3 of us walked back to Nezhyn Street, and Uncle Tolik carried the bags loaded by Aunt Lyouda at the store to be squared up for at her payday.

On climbing up out of the Underpass, we crossed Bazaar along the wide aisle between the rows of empty at that hour counters under the tall lean-to roofs above them, like, lined-up abandoned gazebos, and after walking for another 10 minutes, we turned into Nezhyn Street; a couple of distant lights on far-off lampposts in its depth made it look different from the rest, unlighted, streets….

In Konotop, we arrived at the start of the last quarter in the academic year and both I and the twins became students at School 13 which very conveniently stood right opposite Nezhyn Street, across field-stone-cobbled Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street. Old folks called it “Cherevko’s school” because under the Czar, a certain rich man from the nearby village of Podlipnoye, Cherevko was his name, built a brick two-story pub-house, but the then authorities didn’t allow him to operate it because the would-be pub’s stood too near to the only factory in the city, threatening to make drunks of the local working class en masse, so Cherevko donated the building to the city for arranging a school of four classrooms in it... In the Soviet era, the morality of workingmen

rocketed up so that the present-day pubs moved two-three times closer to that same industrial unit and “Cherevko’s school” got expanded with a long one-story building in the pronounced barrack style, also of bricks. The addition stretched along a quiet side street slanting toward the Swamp named, interchangeably, the Grove, that separated the village of Podlipnoye from Konotop or vice versa.

Going to school for the first time, I couldn’t get the meaning of canvas pouches hanging-dangling alongside the schoolbags or sizable leatherette folders of the students walking in the same direction.

I was surprised to learn that in those pouches they carried their ink-wells. It felt a little out-of-date because the schoolchildren at the Object had long since started using fountain pens with an inside ink-tank whose capacity allowed for refilling it no oftener than once a week if you did not write too much. Ha! Kinda getting from the era of gasoline engines back to the epoch of post stages, yet the very next morning same pouches did not look as something overly striking anymore.

Protracted deafening ding-and-dong of the huge electric bell filled the long corridor in the one-story building, plus all the yard of the “Cherevko’s school”, and 3 adjoining streets in the vicinity. If it signaled a break, everyone went out into the wide schoolyard with an ancient tree in its center and the low building behind it, which comprised the Pioneer Room, the workshop for Handicraft classes, the school library and, as I was too late to learn at the moment, the ski storage room.

The gym, with its windows grated from inside to prevent smashing the panes by ball hits at PE classes, abutted the far end of the barrack-like building at the right angle. Opposite the blind end wall of the gym, there stood a detached hut of toilets of whitewashed brick.

All the break long, a swarm of students hung out at the high stoop of three stairs by the entrance door. The horizontal handrails in the stoop’s landing were congested by perched boys until a maverick teacher would shoo them off and they reluctantly comply only to again light up the moment the teacher’s back vanished in the doorway.

A lively trickle of students kept flowing to and from the toilets in the yard corner, yet the majority of boys (and boys only!) veered before reaching the toilets hut and turned round the gym corner. There, in the narrow passage between the gym and the tall fence of the neighboring garden, life ran high in a brisk cash game for ready money, the game of Bitok at the school Las Vegas grounds, where the average stake was about *pyatak*, 5 copper kopecks, and no less than 2. If you had nickels, say, 10, 15, 20 or even fifty-kopeck in one piece, it’d be exchanged before you say “knife”.

The stakes stacked on the ground in a tiny neat tower—one atop the other, each coin heads up—the *bitok* comes into play.

What’s a *bitok*? It’s hard to say, every player had his favorite hunk of iron—a bolt, a railroad spike, a polished ball from a huge bearing—no limits in the game, you could use whatever you

wanted, be it even a stone. And even the absence of any gear was no problem—anyone would readily lend you his *bitok* for hitting.

Hitting what? That stack of kopecks, silly!. Any coin turned over by your hit and showing their tails is now yours. Collect them into your pocket and hit the remaining stubborn heads, one by one. When no coin turns over, the next player starts his tries.

And who is to open the game? Quite logically, the one who enters the biggest share of kopecks the stack…

At times, the warning cry of "*shuba*!" from the gym corner signaled the approach of some male teacher. The money vanished right away from upon the ground into the pockets, cigarettes hid inside the capped palms. However, the alarm was always false – the teachers turned to the toilet where beside the row of common holes in the floor there was the boarded cabin for Director and the teaching staff.

In just three games, I lost fifteen kopecks, that Mother gave me for a cabbage *piroshki* from the school canteen. This was no wonder though because the *bitok* virtuosos were training their hands at home with their favorite *bitok* pieces while I had to hit with a borrowed one. Maybe, that was even for the better, leaving no time for me to get addicted…

> (...the Konotopian "shuba!" takes roots from thief slang "shukher!" that takes roots from Yiddish "zukher!" each of which means "cheese it!". The school slang "atas!" at the Object meant exactly the same yet derived from the French "l'atantion!". Traditionally, Russian gentry were taught the French…)

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On my first day at school, Class Mistress, Albina Grigoryevna, planted me next to a skinny red-haired girl, Zoya Yemets. I never used Zoya's inkwell, yet Sasha Dryga, a grown-up double repeater with a greasy forelock down to his eyes, resented my presence at her desk and, after the classes, he didn't omit informing me of the fact...

And on the way home I made friends with my classmate Vitya. His last name sounded a bit scary, yet it's a fairly trite one among the Ukrainian family names – Skull. Our on-the-fly friendship had sound foundation though because we both were walking along one and the same Nezhyn Street, and he also lived on it, only farther, next to the Nezhyn Store which was halfway from any of the street's ends. The following day I asked Albina Grigoryevna for moving me to the last desk in the left row, to be seated next to Skull, because we were neighbors and could help each other with home assignments. She respected so weighty reasons and I left Zoya's side.

The desk in front of me and Vitya was seated singly by Vadya Kubarev, which situation immediately gave rise to our triple friendship.

The last names at school were, naturally, used by only teachers, while among the students Skull would surely turn Skully, Kubarev become Kuba and so forth. What handle did I get? Goltz or

Ogle? Neither. If your name happened to be "Sehrguey", they did not bother about vivisecting the last name and everyone started to call you "Gray" by default…

Friendship is power. When the 3 of us were together, even Sasha Dryga refrained from bullying... Friendship is knowledge. I shared the pieces of poetry never included in school curriculum but firmly memorized by all the boys at the Object, such as "To get insured from the cold…", and "The light was burning in the pub…", and "Vaniyka-Halooy went to the fair…" as well as other short but flowery instances of rhymed folklore. And in the context of cultural and philological exchange, my friends explained to me the meaning of popular Konotopian expressions like "Have you fled from Romny?" or "It's time to pack you off to Romny." As it turned out, the town of Romny, about seventy kilometers from Konotop, was the seat of Regional Psychiatric Hospital for nuts…

~ ~ ~

That morning the gambling bouts at Bitok ran low behind the gym. On that clear April morning, the lads stood arguing and waiting for the confirmation of so welcome rumors that the Central TV news program "Time" was grossly mistaken the previous night. Because some guy heard from guys from School 10 that last night some man landed by parachute in the Sarnavsky forest near the Konotop outskirts. And now Sasha Rodionenko would arrive from City, his family had recently moved over there but he still attended our school, just let's wait him come, he should know for sure, he would confirm…

I remembered the flight of Gagarin and as soon after him Guerman Titov was orbiting all day long to say in the evening, "Bye, for now, I'm going to bed." And Dad chuckled with delight and replied to the radio on the wall, "That's a good one!"

Our cosmonauts were always the first and we, elementary school pupils, were arguing who of us was the first to hear the radio announcement about the flight of Popovich or Nikolayev, or the first cosmonautess Tereshkova…

Sasha Rodionenko came but he didn't confirm anything. So the Central TV news program "Time" was not mistaken. And the sun faded in grief...

> Cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov…In the landing module…
>
> Entering the dense layers of the earth's atmosphere…
>
> Perished…

Then Father came and he was followed a week later by the railway container with our things from the Object that arrived at the Freight Station and moved from there on a platform truck to 19 Nezhyn Street, both the wardrobe with the mirror on its door and the folding couch-bed, and the two armchairs with wooden armrests, and the TV set, and all the other implement-utensils. Even the old-fashioned leatherette sofa arrived for which there was no room in the *khutta*.

(…now I can feel nothing but horror at the thought: how could 10 people—2 families and their mutual Grandma Katya—to fit into and live in 1 room and 1 kitchen?

But at that time I didn't think of such things at all because since it was our home and we lived there the way we lived, then it couldn't be somehow different, everything was as it should be and I just lived on along and that's it..)

For the night, Sasha and I readied the folding couch-bed and shared it with Natasha, who lay across at our feet with a chair put next to the couch for her legs. My brother and I had to keep our feet pulled up to the middle of our bed, otherwise, Natasha would grumble and complain to the parents on their bed by the opposite wall, and tell on me and Sasha for kick-fighting. Nice news, eh?! She could stretch her legs out as far as she wanted, and rebuffed my offers to swap our places… The family of Arkhipenkos and Grandma Katya slept in the kitchen.

Parallel to Nezhyn Street, about three hundred meters off, there ran Professions Street one side of which was just one endless wall of tall concrete slabs fencing the Konotop Steam-Engine and Railroad-Car Repair Plant, which name was commonly eschewed and substituted by the short and nice KahPehVehRrZeh. Because of that plant, the part of Konotop outside the Under-Overpass was named the KahPehVehRrZeh Settlement, or just the Settlement.

On the Plant's opposite side, the same slab-wall split it from the multitude of railway tracks in the Konotop Passenger Station and the adjacent Freight Station, where long freight trains were waiting for their turn to start off to their different destinations because Konotop was a big railway junction. The marshaling yard of the Freight Station with freight cars running down the hump, both as loners or in small groups into the sorting lines, sent forth the shrieking screech of wheel chocks, bangs of cars against each other, indistinct screams of loudspeakers with reports about that or another train on that or another sorting line. However, in the daytime the marshaling yard symphony was not too overbearing, its racket whooped it up against the background of night quietude after the noises of day-life subsided…

Regardless of any time of day, whenever it breezed from the nearby village of Popovka, the distillery there permeated the air by its unmistakable stink, which atmospheric phenomenon the Settlement folks christened "From Popovka with Love". Not that the reek was totally lethal, yet you were better off if shunned to sniff at it attentively, anyway, to have a running nose on such days was kinda blessing…

Nezhyn Street connected to Professions Street by lots of frequent lanes. The first of those side streets (counting from School 13) was called Foundry Street because it led to where the former foundry was located inside the Plant and now not seen because of the concrete wall.

Then there came Smithy Street offering the view of the tall brick smokestack by the Plant's smithy behind that same wall.

The next (past our house at number 19) was Gogol Street, neglecting the fact that there was no Gogol, or any other writer for that matter, in front or behind the Plant wall.

The mentioned three streets were more or less straight but those following them before and after the Nezhyn Store tangled in the warren of differently directed lanes which, in the end, also led to the Plant wall if you knew how to navigate them…

The Nezhyn Store gained that name because it stood in Nezhyn Street and it was the largest of all the 3 stores in the Settlement. The smaller ones were named by their numbers.

The premises of Nezhyn Store occupied a separate one-story brick building and a backyard. It comprised 4 departments entered separately and marked by the time-worn tin frames over their doors: “Bread”, “Industrial Goods”, “Grocery”, and “Fish and Vegetables”.

The “Bread” opened in the morning to work until all of the “white” loaves and darker “brick”-bread there got sold out and they could safely lock the emptied department. In the afternoon, with the arrival of the food truck delivering another bunch of “bricks” and loaves from the Konotop Bread Factory, it opened again.

The next, and also the biggest, department—“Industrial Goods”—had two shop windows adorned by dust-smeared miniaturized boxes of security signalization pressed to their panes from inside, on both sides of its mighty door. The store-soiled goods in the glazed showcase-counters were looked after by 3 dead bored saleswomen because they hardly saw a couple of customers a day. The Settlement population, when in need of such goods, preferred to travel to shops in City.

But the 2 saleswomen in the “Grocery” department had their hands full all day long. At times, there even formed a queue, especially on the days when the butter was brought to the department and they cut its huge yellow cube, put next to the scales, with their enormously big knife and wrapped your 2 or 3 hundred grams into the friable blue paper.

And when the “Grocery” was entered by a workman from the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, he was served without standing in the queue because in his palm there was a thoroughly counted and readied amount of kopecks for his vodka, which saved the trouble of counting the change. Besides, he was to come back to his workplace as soon as possible for which end he arrived without changing from his boiler suites, aka *spetzovka*.

The choice of vodkas in the department was fairly extensive, of different colors and names—“Zubrovka”, “Erofeich”, “ Let’s Have One More…”, but people bought only “Moscow Vodka” with its green and white sticker.

The concluding “Fish and Vegetables” department was mostly locked not to disturb its empty dormant shelves and the dried-earth smell left by potatoes sold out last year…

And after the Nezhyn Store, there were Locksmith Street, Wheels Street and in the unexplored as yet depths of the Settlement other streets and lanes and blind alleys…

~ ~ ~

The very first Sunday after our arrival, Aunt Lyouda led me and my sister-'n'-brother to Professions Street that was the only asphalted street in the Settlement. We went along it in the direction of Bazaar and in 5 minutes reached the Plant Club for the 3 o'clock movie show for children.

The Plant Club was a mighty two-story building but as tall as a four-storied one. The masonry in its walls and windows had lots of arches, ledges, and columns, like, a lace-work of smoky bricks. The concrete wall of the Plant enclosure did not miss to surround the backside of the Club as well. In the small square in front of it, there was the Plant Main Check-Entrance built in the same ornate ante-revolution style of masonry, opposed by the modernist structure of the two-story-as-two-story murkily-glazed cube of the Plant Canteen.

We entered the lofty lobby in the Plant Club full of diverse-aged but equally shrill children lining to the small window in the tin-clad door of the ticket office. One boy, a second-grader by his looks, started leaching Aunt Lyouda for ten kopecks to buy himself a ticket, but she snapped at him and he shut up. She seemed to enjoy visiting the Plant Club for an afternoon show for children…

So I learned the route to the Club where, among other things, there also was the Plant Library of two huge halls. The desks in the first one bore the layers of newspapers' filings, wide and thick. Behind the glazed doors in the tall cabinets lined by the walls, there stood familiar rows of never-asked-for works by Lenin, and Marx, and Engels and other similarly popular multi-volume collections.

The next hall had the stacks with normal books for reading. Needless to say, I enrolled immediately because the choice of books on the two shelves in our school library was niggardly poor…

On May Day, our school marched out for the all-city demonstration. The school column looked lively and lovely thanks to the young pioneers and their ceremonial uniform—white shirts and red neckties, all washed, ironed, crisp—while the students of senior grades were responsible for weightier decorations, the heads of the current Members of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in their portraits on roughly smoothed and painted red stocks in the hands of carriers (one Member per three-four carriers, in turn, rotating each 20-30 min.).

Headed by the group of teachers, we walked the uneven cobbles in Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street to Bazaar where Professions Street shared its asphalt to Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street for its dive thru the Under-Overpass. The ascend from the tunnel on its opposite end became an influent to Peace Avenue stretched away to the tall railway embankment in the distance, after which it ran thru the housing area of five-story buildings, named Zelenchuk, followed by the City center – Peace Square. Peace Avenue, tangentially passing Peace Square, separated it from the City Council concealed behind the greens opposite to the granite-rimmed, never working, fountain in the middle of Peace Square concluded by the edifice of Peace Movie Theater.

The middle one of the three alleys in the greens which led directly to the City Council's entrance porch was blocked, because of the demonstration, with the red platform past which the whole city marched in the holiday demonstrations, except for the tenants of the five-story buildings bounding the square who watched demonstrations from their balconies. I did envy the folks at first, but not for long…

On our way to Peace Square, the column of School 13 had time and again to stop for long waits letting the schools of lower numbers overtake us and go ahead. But the working organizations gave way to us, like the columns of the Locomotive Depot, or the Railway Distance Of the South-West Railroad, as it stood in white bulging letters cut of polystyrol and mounted on the crimson-velvet covering in the shields on wheels at their columns' heads. Neither streetcars nor vehicles were seen along all of Peace Avenue, only people, lots of people on foot both walking in the wide stream of columns, and standing by, kinda live banks scanning the current, which made May Day so special and unlike other days.

On entering the vast Peace Square, we had to suddenly change our dignified marching step to a frivolous trotting and kinda run to attack, giggling and panting, with the portraits of those Members atilt, to catch up with the previous column of which we, as usual, had fallen too far behind because of bad timing. And since School 13 was the last but one among the city schools, by the moment when we, mixed up with the disordered ranks of School 14, were passing the red platform, the loudspeakers shouted from up there, "The column of the Konotop Railway Technical School is entering Square! Hooray, comrades!", making us hooray to others and not to ourselves.

After Peace Square the road passed the entrance to the Central Park of Recreation and turned right, descending towards Lenin Street, but we didn't go down there. In the nearest lane, we piled the Political Bureau Members and red banners on a truck that took them back to our school to sit in the Household Manager's storeroom till the next demonstration. And we also went back, on foot, giving Peace Square a pretty wide berth because the passages between the buildings around it were blocked by empty buses, face to face, and in the vast of the empty square solitary figures of militiamen were strolling leisurely.

Yet, it still was a holiday, because before we started for the demonstration Mother gave each of us fifty kopecks, of which there even remained, afterward, some change for a bar of Plombir ice-cream in thin paper wrapping cost 18 kopecks and that of Creamy just only 13. The saleswomen in white robes sold ice-cream from their plywood, double-walled, boxes at every crossing along the trafficless Peace Avenue…

When I returned home, the schoolchildren in festive white shirts and red pioneer ties were still walking along Nezhyn Street returning to the Settlement lanes after the demonstration.

And then I committed the first dastardly act in my life. I went out from the wicket of our *khutta* and wantonly shot with my crook pistol in the guilty of nothing white back of a passer-by boy pioneer. He chased me, but I ran back into the yard up to the kennel of Zhoolka who kept barking and yanking his chain violently, so the boy did not dare come up and only shouted his threats and abuses thru the open wicket…

In summer our parents bought a nanny-goat from Bazaar because when Father received his first payment at the Plant and brought home 74 rubles, Mother, confusedly looking at the money in his hand, asked, “How? Is that all?”

The purchase was meant to make living easier but, in fact, it only complicated life because now I had to walk the white nanny-goat on a rope into Foundry Street or Smithy Street where she grazed the dust-covered grass along the weather-worn fences.

To drink any of the goat milk I refused downright in spite of all Mother's wheedling how hugely beneficial it was for health. After a while, the goat was slaughtered and tenderized into cutlets which I ignored completely…

Sometimes Grandma Katya’s son, Uncle Vadya, came to our *khutta* in his boiler-oil smeared *spetzovka* during the midday breaks at the Plant to beg hooch because his colleagues were a-waiting, but his plea seldom succeeded.

Uncle Vadya had a smooth black hair combed back and a toothbrush mustache also black, the skin in his face was of slick olive hue, like that of young Arthur in *The Gadfly* by Lillian Voynich, and on his right hand he missed the middle finger lost at the beginning of his workingman career.

“I couldn’t get it first. Well, okay, that’s my finger dropped upon the machine tool, but where's the water from that drips on it? A-ha! that’s my tears!” so he recounted the accident. Doctors sewed up the stump very nicely—smooth and no scars at all—so that when he made the fig it came out 2 at once. The double-barreled fig looked very funny and no chance for anyone to ape the trick even remotely.

Uncle Vadya lived in the *khutta* of his mother-in-law near the Bus Station. There's a special term in Ukrainian for a man living with his in-laws, which is *primmuck*, aka Adoptee. Bitter is the share of an Adoptee! As reported by Uncle Vadya, a *primmuck* had to keep quieter than the still water and lower than the grass. His mother-in-law he had to address with “Mommy” and kowtow even to the hens kept by her in the yard, and his duty was washing their legs when they saw it fit to perch for the night…

We all loved Uncle Vadya for he was so funny and kind, and smiling all the time. And he had his special way of greeting, “So, how are you, golden kids?”

At the age of ten, when the German Company Headquarters were just behind the wall—in the Pilluta’s part of the *khutta*—Vadya Vakimov climbed onto the fence in the backyard and attempted at cutting the cable of the occupants’ telephone connection. The Germans yelled at him but didn’t shoot and kill right on the spot…

When I asked how he dared act in such a heroic way, Uncle Vadya replied that he no longer remembered. However, it’s hardly possible that he wished to become a pioneer partisan posthumous Hero of the Soviet Union, most likely he was allured by the multi-colored wires

running inside telephone cables of which you could pleat lots of different ornamental things, even a lush finger-ring…

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On my way to the Nezhyn Store, I was intercepted by a pair of guys riding one bike. First, they overtook me, then the one sitting on the bike rack jumped off to the ground and smacked me in the face. Of course, it was a revolting dishonor, however, though he was half-head shorter than me, I didn't fight back in fear of his companion who also got off the bike, some brawny tall oaf.

"I told you'll catch hell!" said the offender and they left. I realized whose back I had shot at with a crook…

The movie shows at Club started at six and eight in the evening. With the tickets bought in the lobby, the film-goer had to climb the straight flight of wide red-painted thick-board steps to the second floor. The tiled landing up there somehow managed to always have kinda murky air despite the two high windows and three doors.

The door to the right opened a small hall with a switched off TV set in front of a dozen short rows of seats, always vacant, and the handrailed flight of steep openwork iron stairs up to the projectionist booth. On both sides of the dead TV, two more big doors led to the huge gym of the Ballet Studio which is not what you need with the cinema tickets in your pocket. So, back again to the tiled landing with two more still unexplored doors.

The first door on the left was always locked because it led to the balcony in the auditorium. And the next, invitingly open door was controlled by everlastingly grim auntie Shura, who stood by in her helmet-like head kerchief, a kinda somber sentry in charge of tearing off the check part in your ticket before letting you in.

The floor inside the vast auditorium had a slight slant towards the wide white screen behind which there was a big stage with two porches and doors by the side walls. For concerts or performances by puppet theater, the cinema screen was drawn to the left wall disclosing the dark-blue plushy velvet of the stage curtains. The open balconies adorned with alabaster swag ran along the sidewalls, yet stopped before reaching the stage. By the rear wall, the balconies sloped steeply from both sides, so as not to block the loopholes of the projectionist booth from where the flicking widening beam streamed to the screen to deliver a movie.

In the lobby on the first floor, next to the windowed door of the ticket office, there hung the list of movies for the current month brush-written in the canvas stretched over a sizable wooden frame. Films changed every day except for Monday when there was no cinema at all. So you could make your choice in advance and know when to ask from Mother twenty kopecks for the show… Summertime annulled the cinema expenses totally because the Plant Park, hidden behind the long dilapidated two-story apartment block that stood above the tilt to the Under-Overpass tunnel, was a great money-saver. In the Park, apart from its three alleys, a locked dance-floor,

and the large gazebo of beer pavilion, there also was the open-air cinema behind a pretty tall plank fence with conveniently located gaps and holes in its rear part.

The show began after nine when twilight showed signs of getting denser and, more importantly, if the ticket office on the first floor of the projectionists' booth managed to sell at least four tickets because the new generation preferred watching films from outside the cinema. However, standing on foot by a hole for an hour and a half, with your nose buried in planks roughed by merciless time and calamitous weather, was not exactly what you'd call a pleasurable recreation. That's why the film-going guys took advantageous seats in the old apple trees grown by the brick structure of the projectionist booth. If your fork in the tree was too narrow or the bough too bumpy for comfortable sitting, next time you'd be smarter to come earlier and have a better choice from the vacant tree-seats…

The film went on, the warm summer darkness thickened around two or three dim lamps in the Plant Park alleys and the stars peeped from the night sky thru the gaps in the apple tree foliage. On the silver screen, the black-and-white "The Jolly Fellows" with Leonid Utesov kept slapping each other with drums and double basses and at less breathtaking moments you could stretch your hand out and grope among the apple-tree twigs to find, somewhere between the Cassiopeia and Andromeda constellations, a small inedible crab-apple for biting tiny bitter bits off its stone-hard side.

After a good film, like that one starring Rodion Nakhapetov where there were no fights, neither wars, but just scenes about life, about death, and beautiful motorcycle riding thru shallow waters, the spectators walked out of the Park gate and headed to the cobbled Budyonny Street without the usual bandit whistles or cat-yells. The sparse crowd of people became somehow quietened and united, sort of related by the mutually watched film, and kept peaceful walking thru the darkness of a warm night, dwindling at the invisible crossroads, on their way to the lonely lamppost at the junction of Bogdan Khmelnytsky and Professions Streets next to Bazaar….

But the main thing because of which the guys were waiting for the summer was, of course, bathing. The start of the swimming season took place late May at the Kandeebynno and marked the summer's coming into its own. The Kandeebynno was several lakes used for breeding the mirror carp, and it also was the springhead of the Yezooch river. At times along the lakes-splitting dams, there rode a solitary bicycler-overseer, so that guys wouldn't poach too cheekily with their fishing poles. Yet, in one of those lakes they didn't breed the carp, it was left for bathing of beach-goers…

However, to go for a swim at the Kandeebynno, you had to know how to get there. Mother said that although having had visited the spot she couldn't explain the way and it was better to ask Uncle Tolik, who both to work and back, and, in fact, everywhere went by his motorbike "Jawa", so he, of course, should know.

The Kandeebynno, according to his instruction, was all too easy to find. When going towards City along Peace Avenue, you pass under the bridge in the railway embankment, so take the first right turn which you couldn't miss because it's where started the road to Romny, and follow it to

the intersection by which take another right turn and go on until you see the railway barrier, cross the railway, turn to the left and—here you are!—that's the Kandeebynno for you…

The twins, sure enough, pressed for going along with me. We took an old bed cover to spread and lie upon when sunbathing, put it into a mesh-bag, added a bottle of water and went to the Under-Overpass where Peace Avenue started. Up to the railway embankment, the road was familiar after the May Day demonstration. We went under the bridge and saw it at once – the road running to the right along the base of the elevated railway. True enough, it didn't look a highway because of no asphalt in it, yet being as wide as any other road, it was the first one to the right after the bridge. So, we turned and followed the road along the base of the tall steep embankment.

However, the farther we went, the narrower the road became transforming into a wide trail, then into a footpath tread which soon just vanished. We had no choice but to climb the steep grass-overgrown embankment, shake the sand out from our sandals and march on stepping on the concrete crossties or along the endless narrow railheads. Natasha was the first to notice the trains catching up from behind, and we stepped down onto the uneven gravel in the ballast shoulder, giving way for the rumbling, wind-whipping cars to shoot past us.

When we reached the next bridge, there was no avenue or a street under it, just other railway tracks. Our embankment turned right and started to gradually go down joining the tracks in their flow towards the distant Railway Station. It became clear, that we were going in the opposite direction and not to any lakes at all.

We did not have time to get disappointed though, because far below we marked a small field at the base of another embankment, beneath the bridge in ours. Two groups of tiny, at that distance, guys in light summer clothes, and with the mesh-bags like ours, walked towards a copse of green trees, and they had even a ball among them. Where else could they go if not to a beach?!.

We climbed down two steep embankments and went along the same path in the field as the previous guys who were gone out of sight long ago. Then we walked thru the Aspen grove along a lonely railway track with soft soil instead of crushed stone ballast between its wooden ties until we reached a highway that crossed the track beneath two raised barriers. We passed over the highway and followed a wide, at times boggy, path among the tall growth of bright green grass. The chest straightened out with cautiously expectant exaltation, "Aha, Kandeebynno! You won't flee now!"

Groups of people were walking the same path in both directions, but those going there more numerous than back-comers. The path led to a wide canal of dark water between the shore and the opposite dam of the fish lakes and continued along the canal. We followed it on and on, among green trees, under white cumuli in the azure-blue summer sky. The straight rows of fruit-trees in a neglected no man's orchard went up over the smooth slant to the right of the path. Then the canal on the left widened into a lake with a white sand beach. The expanse of sand was bound by the grass between the tall Currant bushes in the forlorn garden.

We chose a free streak of grass for our bed cover, hastily undressed, and ran over the unbearably heated sand to the water flying from each direction into any other, splashed up and sent over in strangling sprays to faces of dozens of folks eagerly screaming, yelling, and laughing in the water which seethed from their merry frolics.

Summer!. Ah, Summer!.

As it turned out later, Uncle Tolik didn't even know of that vanishing road along the embankment base, because when his motorbike at a roaring speed shot from under the bridge in Peace Avenue, he in two seconds flat was on the Romny highway, while going on foot you reached it after some generous hundred meters of stomping…

In the list of movies for July, there stood "The Sons of Big Bear", so Skully and I agreed not to miss it because Goiko Mitich starred in the film as one of her sons. That Yugoslavian actor was mostly engaged as a hero red-skin in this or that of GDR Westerns and, as long as he was in, you could safely expect it'd be a decent movie. Sure enough, the list did not report all those details or anything at all except for the movie's title and the date of show. However, the films arrived to the Plant Club no sooner than a couple of months after their run for a week at the Peace Movie Theater and one more week at the Vorontsov Movie Theater on Square of the Konotop Divisions that's why, with the little help of our friends, we could always make an informed decision. And we weren't especially keen on watching movies at the mentioned theaters not because of trust in the unmistakable flair of our friends, no, their leads well sucked at times, but for the much simpler motivation – a ticket at the Peace Movie Theater was 50 kopecks, watching the same film a week later at the Vorontsov set you back for five-and-thirty, whereas, after practicing your patience for a month plus, you enjoyed it at Club paying reasonable 20 kopecks…

On that Sunday the 3 of us—Kuba, Skully, and I—went to the Kandeebynno by bikes. We swam and dived, in turn, off the self-made launch-pad when 2 of us, chest-deep in the water, clasped our hands for the third to climb upon and take a dive from. And, of course, we played "spots", though you couldn't catch up Kuba underwater.

Then he and Skully got lost somewhere in the bathing crowd. In vain looked I for the friends midst the splashes and squeals, they were nowhere around. Just in case, I even swam to the opposite shore which was the dam of the fish lakes. A couple of guys were fishing there, with their eye alert for an opportunity to angle in the mirror carp paradise over the dam. And I swam back so as not to scare off their fish, which was striking even in the lake for swimmers. Then I once again scanned the crowd in the water, to no avail, and decided it was enough.

Chilled thru and thru, I stepped out onto the scorching sand of the beach when the lost friends came running from among the bushes of Currant with the hair on their heads almost dry already, "W-where the h-hell were you?"

"We're getting in again. Let's go!"

"You w-wackos?! I'm-m just c-coming out!"

“So what? Let’s go!”

“Ah, damn! Off we’ll d-drive the c-city boys!.”

And whipping up foamy splashes with the three pairs of racing feet, we rushed together to deeper places to dive, and yell, and hoo-ha. Each summer was the summer then…

Kuba refused to join our going to the movie, he'd already seen that western, and Skully also changed his mind. That fact didn’t stop me, and I decided to take twenty kopecks from Mother and watch it all the same. At home, Grandma Katya told me, that my parents left two hours ago together with the twins and she didn’t know where they went. So what? There remained three more hours before the next show, enough time for them to come back…

At the end of the third hour, I was squashed by an overwhelming anxiety: where could they be? So I asked it once again, yet of Aunt Lyouda already. With complete indifference and even somewhat grouchy, she replied, “I wouldn’t even have seen you.” She always became like that when Uncle Tolik was gone fishing.

Two more hours passed, the show was missed hopelessly but, flooded by the feeling of an unavoidable and already accomplished catastrophe, I didn’t care for any cinema at all. The tide of despair dragged in some sketchy pictures of a truck jumping over to the sidewalk, vague wailing of ambulance sirens, and only one thing was clear – I no longer had any parents nor any sister-'n'-brother.

The darkness thickened. Uncle Tolik pulled up in the street on his return from fishing and rolled his “Jawa” motorbike across the yard to the shed section. He went to *khutta* and I, freaked out and crushed by my grief and loneliness, was sitting on the grass next to sleepy Zhoolka…

It was already quite late when the iron handle-hook in the wicket clinked. Sasha and Natasha ran into the yard followed by Mother’s cheerful voice from the street. I rushed to meet them torn apart between joy and resentment, “So, where were you lost?”

“Visiting Uncle Vadya,” said Mother. “And what’s up with you?”

I burst into tears mixed with muddled mumbling about bear’s sons and twenty kopecks because I couldn’t explain that for half of that day I was mourning the loss of them all, fighting back the prospect of life without the family.

“You could ask the money from Aunt Lyouda.”

“So? I did ask and she said she wouldn’t like to see me too.”

“What? Come on into the *khutta*!”

And at home, she squabbled with her sister, and Aunt Lyouda retorted it was all bullshit and she’d only said she wouldn’t see me too if I hadn’t come. But I obstinately repeated my bullshit.

Mother and Aunt Lyouda screamed at each other louder and louder. Grandma Katya tried to calm them down, “Stop it! What a shame, all the neighbors would hear, and the people in the street too.”

Natasha, Sasha, Irochka, and Valerik, their eyes rounded by fright, crowded in the doorway between the kitchen and the room where Father and Uncle Tolik were sitting with their silent sullen stares stuck to the TV box…

That’s how I committed the second meanness in my life – slandered innocent Aunt by my false accusations. And though her response to my questioning I got exactly the way as related to Mother, yet after the Aunt’s interpretation, I could agree that, yes, so was her answer, however, I never admitted my base calumny.

That lying without words filled me with compunction because the quarrel in the *khutta* was my fault. I felt guilty before both Aunt Lyouda and her kids, and before Mother, who I belied, and before everyone because I was such a sissy dishrag, “Woe is me! I’m left alone in the whole world!” My contrition was never voiced though because we were not bred up to make apologies. True, at times they could be heard in movies, but for real life, when inadvertently you had someone pushed, run into or stuff, “Excuse me for not trying harder!” was enough.

All that annoyance about nothing triggered off a slow, inconspicuous, process of my alienation and transformation into a “cut off slice” as Father used to say. I began to live a separate life of my own although, of course, I did not realize or felt anything of the kind and just lived that way…

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Mother and Aunt Lyouda made up rather soon, after Aunt Lyouda showed Mother how to correctly sing the popular at that time “*Cheremshina* blossoms everywhere”, besides, she was bringing from her work the chow you couldn’t buy anywhere because at any store any goods beyond the pretty niggardly scope of staples were sold exclusively under the counter to the circle of trusted people: the kindred of salespersons and those who could potentially scratch your back in answer...

Aunt Lyouda’s tales about the midday-meal break at their deli were so funny!. After they latched the shop entrance for the midday break, the saleswomen gathered in their locker room and started their show of delicatessens brought that day from home in their half-liter glass jars. They were comparing, exchanging comments and judgments, evaluating the appeal, sharing their recipes.

The store manager ate separately in her office and when the telephone on her desk rang, she answered the call and hollered thru the open door who was wanted. The woman in question would hurriedly travel from the locker room to the manager’s office and back but—however short and hurried the phone talk—her jar content, by her return, was heavily reduced by cluster degustation. Everyone too eager to see the taste. One lick is better than a hundred looks, right?.

Yet, there is one foxy bitch at the store. Whenever called by the manager to the phone, she calmly sets her spoon aside, deliberately clears her throat with a "*khirk*!", and spits into her jar. Yahk! After the procedure, in no haste of any kind, she leaves the locker room for the pending conversation and never looks back at the rest of the saleswomen with their interest in her jar lost irreparably…

Mother also started working in the trade, she got a cashier job in the large Deli 6 near the Station. However, two months later she had a major shortage there. Mother was very worried and kept repeating she couldn't make so vast a mistake. Someone from the deli workers should have knocked out a check for a large sum when Mother went to the toilet forgetful to lock the cash register. Selling of Father's coat of natural leather, which he bought when working at the Object, helped out of the pickle. After that Mother worked in retail outlets manned by a single salesperson, herself, without any suspicious colleagues, at one or another stall in the Central Park of Recreation by Peace Square where they sold wine, biscuits, cigarettes and draft beer….

End summer there again was a squabble in our *khutta*, though this time not a sisterly quarrel but a scrap between a husband and his wife. The source for discontent became the newspaper-wrapped mushrooms which Uncle Tolik brought from a ride to the forest. Not a remarkably big harvest, they still would do for a pot of soup.

The insidious newspaper package was accurately cinched and put by unsuspecting Uncle Tolik into the mesh-bag which he hung on his motorbike steer not to scatter the mushrooms on the way. However, at home instead of grateful praise, he got a shrill tongue-lashing from Aunt Lyouda, who discovered that the string used for cinching was a brassiere shoulder strap. In vain Uncle Tolik repeatedly declared that he had just picked up "the damn scrap of a string" in the forest, Aunt Lyouda responded with louder and louder assertions that she was not born the day before and let them show her a forest where bras grew in bushes, and there's no use of trying to make a fool of her... Grandma Katya no longer tried to appease the quarrelers and only looked around with saddened eyes.

(And that became a lesson for 2 at once – Uncle Tolik learned to never bring home any mushrooms and I grasped the meaning of "bra strap".)

But Aunt Lyouda, on the spur of the moment, let herself a try at forbidding even the Uncle Tolik's fishing rides, at which point it was he who raise his voice until they reached a compromise: he was allowed to go fishing under the condition of my going along. So, the following 2 or 3 years from spring to autumn every weekend with a pair of fishing rods and a spinner hitched to the trunk rack of his "Jawa" we set off to fishing.

Mostly we rode to the river of Seim. At times we fished in the Desna river, but then we had to start off at dark because it was a seventy-kilometer ride there… Shooting ahead before the roar of its own engine, charged "Jawa" thru the city submerged in its night repose, the streets empty and free of anything including the State Traffic Control militia... Then, after the thirty-kilometer-long ride along Baturin highway, we got to the even asphalt of Moscow freeway where Uncle Tolik sometimes squeezed out of his made in Czech-Slovakia motorbike a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour…

When we turned off onto the field roads, the dawn was gradually catching up “Jawa”. I sat behind, grabbing Uncle Tolik by sides with my hands stuck in the pockets of his motorcyclist jacket of artificial leather so that they wouldn’t freeze away in the chilly headwind. The night around little by little transformed into twilight with the darker stretches of windbreak belts showing up about the fields, the sky grew lighter, showed ragged shreds of clouds in their transition from white to pink glad to feel the touches of sky-long sun rays sent beforehand from beyond the horizon...The breathtaking views stirred thrill intense no less than by wild-flight riding…

Our usual bait was worms dug in the kitchen garden but one time the fishermen-gurus advised Uncle Tolik to try dragonfly larvae. Those critters live underwater in clumps of clay by the higher river bank, and the fish just go crazy about them, like, snapping the larva-rigged hook from each other...

We drove up to the riverbank amid murky twilight. “Java” coughed out its last breath and stopped. The river lapped sleepily, wrapped in thin wisps of fog rising from the water. Uncle Tolik explained that it was me who had to fetch those lumps of clay onto the bank. A mere thought of entering that dark water in the dusk of still lingering night threw a shiver up the spine, but a good ride deserved a good dive. I undressed and, on the advice of the elder, took a headlong dive into the river.

Wow! As it turned out, the water was much warmer than the damp morning chill on the bank! I dragged slippery lumps out of the river and Uncle Tolik broke them ashore to pick the larvae out from the tunnels drilled by them for living in clay. When he said it was enough I even didn’t want to leave the engulfing warmth of the stream…

Still and all, it was an instance of unmasked exploitation of adolescent labor and that same day I got square with him for the molesting misuse...

Uncle Tolik preferred a spinner to a fishing rod and, with a sharp whipping thrust, he could send the lure to a splashdown almost halfway to the opposite bank of the wide river and then started to spin the reel on the tackle handle zig-zag pulling the flip-flap flash of the lure back. Predatory fish, like pine or bass, chased it and swallowed the triple hook in the tail of the lure, if the fisherman luck would have it.

So, by noon we moved to another place with a wooden bridge across the river and Uncle Tolik walked over to the opposite, steep, bank to go along and throw the lure here and there. I remained alone and watched the floats of the two fishing rods stuck in the sand by the current and then stretched out in the nearby grass…

When Uncle Tolik walked the opposite bank coming back to the bridge, I didn’t raise my head above the grass about me and watched him struggling thru the jungle of knotgrass and other weeds I lay in. In the movie-making business they call this trick “forced perspective” by use of which he acted a Lilliputian for me. Up to the very bridge…

Once Aunt Lyouda asked if I had ever seen her husband entering some *khutta* during our fishing trips. It gave me no qualms to give an absolutely honest direct answer that, no, I hadn’t. As for that one time in the Popovka village, when he suddenly remembered that we had set off without any bait and dumped me in an empty village street to wait while he would quickly ride to someplace—not too far off—to dig up worms and be straight back, all what I saw around was the soft deep sand in the road between the towering walls of nettles and the blackened straw in the roof of the barn by whose side I was dropped off but no entering, nor any *khuttas* whatsoever. That’s why I safely could say “no” to my inquisitive Aunt…

There happened falls, yet just a couple of times. The first one while riding over the field along the path on top of a meter high embankment with the tall grass flying by on both sides from the bike. I guessed it was an embankment because the tall grass was lower than our wheels, but what purpose could it serve for among the fields? The question remained unanswered because the embankment broke off suddenly among the tall grass concealing the pit into which “Jawa” nosedived after a long jump thru the air, and the hard landing threw us both far ahead over the bike.

The other time we had hardly started along Nezhyn Street when the motorbike got tripped by a piece of iron pipe piled nearby someone’s *khutta's* foundation so that vehicles would not go too close by and splash at it the dirt and water from the puddles developed in the road…

However, both times we got no injuries except for bumps because on our heads there were white plastic helmets. It’s only that after the fall in Nezhyn Street, the ride had to be canceled because “Jawa's” absorber started to leak oil and needed an urgent repair…

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Square of the Konotop Divisions, was called so to commemorate the Soviet Army units that liberated the city in the Great Patriotic War, aka WWII, and were honored for that deed by the city’s name in their respective denominations.

For me, it, at first, seemed the end of world because it took eight streetcar stops to get there from the Station. Square of the Konotop Divisions was as wide as three roads put side by side, and it had a slight south-west slant along all of its considerable length.

At the Square’s upper right corner, there stood a metal openwork tower like the famous one in Paris, yet more useful because the Konotop tower held a huge water tank on its top adorned with “I love you, Olya!” in jerky splotches of paint brush strokes over its rust-smeared side overlooking Square of the Konotop Divisions. Beneath the tower, behind the high wall carrying neat dense rows of barbered wire along its top, was the city prison.

In the upper left corner, opposite the tower, the tall gate opened to the City Kolkhoz Market which, technically, was outside it and in Square itself the gate served the starting point for the line of small stores going down the gradual slant – “Furniture”, “Clothes”, “Shoes”…

At its right lower end, Square was delimited by a tall two-story building with more windows than walls—the Konotop Sewing Factory—followed by a squat house with more walls than windows — the City Sober-up Station, yet the facility stood already in the out-flowing street which led to the dangerous outskirt neighborhood of Zagrebelya. Its hazardous nature was established by nasty scumbags who intercepted guys from other city neighborhoods, brave enough to see girls of Zagrebelya home. The valiant were made perform their version of rooster cry, or measure with a match the length of the bridge to Zagrebelya or just got a vanilla beating from the villains…

Square of the Konotop Divisions was crossed, bend-sinister, by the tram-track which entered it on the left below the long blind wall with three exit doors from the Vorontsov Movie Theater, whose entrance was from Lenin Street.

When a mobile menagerie arrived in the city, they would arrange their trailers and cages into a big square camp in the sector between the streetcar track and the Sewing Factory. The temporary enclosure looked like the Czech Taborites defense camp from the Hussite wars in The Medieval History textbook. Yet, inside their corral of wagons, they placed two additional rows of cages, back to back, for the thick crowd of Konotopers and folks from the nearby villages to walk around them as well as along the cages in the inner side of the mobile perimeter wall.

Square legends in the cage gratings announced the name and age of the inmate, and the surf-like hum from the throng of on-lookers hung over Square of the Konotop Divisions, interspersed with wild shrieks and wailing of the caged animals. That happened once every three years….

And a couple of times the Wall of Death riders also visited Square of the Konotop Divisions. In front of the gate to the City Kolkhoz Market, they erected a high tarpaulin tent with a five-meter-tall ring-wall of planks inside.

Two times a day, they let the on-lookers to climb in from outside under the tent roof and crane their on-looking faces over the wall top and watch how the riders circled arena on two motorcycles to gain the speed sufficient for getting over the ramp onto the ring-wall, and bucket along it in a horizontal plane with the deafening rumble of their motors…

Leaving Square of the Konotop Divisions by Lenin Street, you passed the Vorontsov Movie Theater on the left followed by the three-story cube of House of Householding with all kinds of repair workshops and ateliers. By the fence between the 2 landmarks and parallel to it was placed a tall stand of iron pipes and sheets. The catching legend “DO NOT PASS BY!” crowned the sturdy construction used for hanging black-and-white photos of people taken to the Sober-up Station, a paper slip beneath each glazed frame reported their name and what organizations they worked at. Some ripper creepy pictures they were, the close-ups of faces as if got skinned, or something. I felt a kinda pity for the alcoholics hanged there. Probably, because of that another, far away stand at the Object which I abhorred so much. The two stands established sort of affinity between me and, well… at least, their kids… No, I don’t think I exercised in any psycho-analytical speculations then, yet how come whenever passing that particular segment of Lenin Street I always found something else to look at beyond the ugly stand?

Farther on along Lenin Street, past the first crossing, the House of Culture of the Red Metallurgist Plant stood a little way back, moved off the road by the tiny square of its own. Both sides of that square were bound by the stands planted for merrier ends, presenting glue-mounted pages from satirical magazines – the Russian "Crocodile" on the left, and the Ukrainian "Pepper" on the right.

Between the road and each of the stands, there was a tin-and-glass stall facing its symmetric twin across the square. The one by the "Crocodile" was selling ice-cream and lemonade, while all sorts of nick-knackery were the merchandise at that by the "Pepper". There, among the motley keep-sake ceramic trifles, plastic necklaces, paper decks of cards, I spotted sets of matchbox stickers and, starting for my next trip to City, I asked for extra kopecks and bought one, with the pictures of animals. However, when I brought the purchase home to enhance the collection brought from the Object, I realized it wouldn't be right. The older stickers, peeled off their matchboxes, bore the small-printed address of the match manufacturing factory, as well as "the price – 1 kopeck", while the set bought from the stall was just a pack of sticker-sized pictures. Since then I had lost all interest in the collection, and passed it to my friend Skully…

Skully lived by the Nezhyn Store with his mother, and grandmother, and the dog named Pirate, although the last dwelt outside the puny house of so small a kitchen and bedroom that both would fit into the only room of our *khutta*, however, theirs was a detached property.

Next to their *khutta* there stood an adobe-plastered shed which, apart from usual household tools and the coal stored for winter, sheltered a handcart – an elongated box of deals fixed upon the axis of 2 iron wheels the length of iron pipe that jutted from under the box bottom ended with a crossbar for steering the juggernaut when you pushed it or pulled along.

Between the *khutta* and the wicket to the street, there stretched a long garden enclosed from both sides by the neighbors' fences which, all in all, was bigger than those two or three vegetable beds of ours. In autumn and spring, I came to help Skully at the seasonal turning of dirt in their garden. Deeply stabbing the soil with our bayonet spades, we gave out the fashionable Settlement byword, "No Easter cake for you, buddy! Grab a piroshki and off to work, the beds wait for digging!" And red Pirate, cut loose, frisked and galloped about the old cherry trees bounding the narrow path to the rickety wicket…

When we moved to Konotop, my first and foremost responsibility became fetching water for our *khutta*. Daily supply averaged 50 liters. A pair of enamel pails full of water stood in the dark nook of the tiny veranda, on two stools next to the kerosene stove. From a nail in the plank wall above the pails, there hung a dipper for drinking or filling a cooking pan. But first, the pails were used to fill up the tank of the washstand in the kitchen that held exactly two pailfuls.

Mounted above the tin sink, the tank had a hinged lid and a tap jutting from its bottom. It was one of those spring-pin taps installed in the toilets of cars in a passenger train, so to make water run you pressed the pin from underneath. From the sink, the soapsuds dripped into the cabinet under it where stood the slop bucket which needed control checks to avoid brimming over and flooding the kitchen floor. The discharge was taken out and poured into the spill pit next to the outhouse in the garden.

The water came from the pump on the corner of Nezhyn and Gogol Streets, some forty meters from our wicket. The meter-tall pig-iron stub of a pump had the nose of the same material enclosing the waterpipe, you hung your pail over the nose and gave a big push-down to the iron handle behind the stub for the vigorous jet to bang into the pail, brim and go splashing over onto the road if not watched closely. 2 daily water-walks–4 pails, all in all–were enough for our *khutta*, if, of course, there was no washing that day, however, the water for Aunt Lyouda's washing was fetched by Uncle Tolik...

When the rains set in, the water-walks became a little longer—you had to navigate bypassing the wide puddles in the road. In winter the pump got surrounded by a small, ripping slippery, skating rink of its own from thanks to the water spillage by the pump users, the smooth ice had to be walked in careful step-shuffles. The dark winter nights made you appreciate the perfect positioning of the log lamppost next to the pump...

And also on me was the fuel delivery for the kerogas that looked like a small gas stove of 2 burners and had 2 cups on its backside to fill them with kerosene that soaked, thru 2 thin tubes, 2 circular wicks of asbestos in the burners which were lit when cooking dinner, heating water for tea or imminent washing on the smelly yellow flames edged by jagged jerky tips of oily soot.

After kerosene, I went to Bazaar with a twenty-liter tin canister… Fairly aside from the Bazaar counters, stood the huge cubic tank of rusty sheet iron. The sale day was announced in the chalk note over the tank side – "kerosene will be ..." and there followed the date when they were to bring it. However, so too many dates had changed each other—wiped and written over and over again—that no figures could be read within the thick chalk smudge, that's why they just dropped writing and the tank side greeted you with the perpetually optimistic line, "kerosene will be ...!"

A shallow brick-faced trench under the tank side accommodated the short length of pipe from its bottom ending with a tap blocked by a padlock. On the proclaimed day, a saleswoman in a blue satin smock descended into the trench and sat by the tap on a small stool ferried along. She also brought a multi-liter aluminum cauldron, and put it under the tap, took the padlock away and filled the vessel, up to three-quarters, with the foamy yellowish jet of kerosene.

The queue started moving to her with their bottles, canisters, and cans which she filled with a dipper thru a tin funnel, collecting the pay into her blue pocket. When the dipper began to dub the cauldron bottom, she turned the tap on to restore the fluid level.

In fact, they didn't need at all to bother about writing the sale date, because each morning Grandma Katya visited Bazaar and two days ahead brought the news when "kerosene will be …!" indeed. So, on the kerosene sale day after coming from school, I took the canister and went to spend a couple of hours in the line to the trench under the tank. Sometimes, they were also selling it in the Nezhyn Store backyard equipped with the same facility, but that happened not as often and the line was no shorter…

~ ~ ~

Soon after the summer vacations, I was elected Chairman of the Pioneer Platoon Council of our 7th "B" grade because the former Chairman (the red-haired skinny Yemets) moved to some other city together with her parents.

At the Pioneer Platoon meeting, two of the nominees announced self-withdrawal without giving any particular reasons for their refusal, and the Senior Pioneer Leader of our school pushed forward my candidature.

Following the trend, I also started sluggish excuses, which he rebuffed with energetic clarification that all that was not for long because we all were soon to become members of the Leninist Young Communist League, aka Komsomol.

> (...the structure of the pioneer organizations in the Soviet Union presented an awesome example of organization based on precise and well-thought-out organizational principles for organizing any workable organization.
>
> In every Soviet school, each class of students on reaching the proper age automatically became a Platoon of Young Pioneers of 4 or 5 Pioneer Rings. Ring Leaders together with Platoon Chairman formed the Council of the Pioneer Platoon. Chairmen of the Pioneer Platoons made up the Council of the School Pioneer Company. Then there came District or City Pioneer Organizations converging into Republican ones (15 of them) which, in their turn, composed the All-Union Pioneer Organization.
>
> Such a crystal-wise-structured pyramid for convenient handling... That is why the heroes of Komsomol resistance underground during the German occupation of Krasnodon City did not have to reinvent the wheel. They used the all too familiar structure after renaming "rings" into "cells"...
>
> If, of course, we take for granted the attestation found in *The Young Guard*, the novel written by A. Fadeyev. He composed his work on the basis of information provided by the relatives of Oleg Koshevoy. In the resulting literary work, Oleg became the underground leader while Victor Tretyakevich, who, actually, accepted Oleg to the resistance organization, was depicted there as the mean traitor under the fictional name of Stakhevich.
>
> Fourteen years after the book publication, Tretyakevich was rehabilitated and awarded an order posthumously because he did not die during interrogations at organs of the Soviet NKVD but was executed by the fascist invaders when they busted the Krasnodon underground.
>
> In the early sixties, a few other secondary traitors from the book, whose names the writer did not bother to disguise, had served from ten to fifteen years in the NKVD camps and got rehabilitated as well. By that moment, the writer himself had time enough to put a bullet thru his head in May 1956, shortly after his participation in the meeting of Nikita Khrushchev, the then leader of the USSR, with the survived young guardsmen of Krasnodon.

At the mentioned meeting, Fadeyev grew inadequately nervous and yelled at Khrushchev in front of all the present, calling him names considered especially defamatory at that period, and two days later he committed suicide. Or else, they committed his suicide though, of course, such an expression—"they committed his suicide"—is unacceptable by the language norms.

Hence the moral – even the cleverest structure cannot guarantee from a collapse if your pyramid is not made of at least 16-ton stone blocks...)

Late September, Chairman of our School Pioneer Company fell ill and, in his stead, I was delegated to the City Pioneer Organization Account Meeting of the Chairmen of the Councils of City School Pioneer Companies. The Meeting was held at the Konotop House of Pioneers in a pleasantly secluded location behind the Monument to Fallen Heroes on the rise above Lenin Street.

By the organization regulations, an Account Meeting should elect its Chairman and Secretary. The Meeting Chairman's job consisted of announcements whose turn it was to account while Secretary would take notes of how much waste paper and scrap metal was collected by the pioneers of the reporting Chairman's school during the specified period, which cultural events were organized, and what places were taken by their pioneers in the city-wide contests and competitions.

The Senior Pioneer Leader of our school had supplied me with a sheet of paper to be read at the Account Meeting but, in the House of Pioneers, they charged me with the additional responsibility of the appointed Chairman of the Meeting. I was assured that presiding an Account Meeting was as easy as pie. All you had to do was to declare, "And now the floor for the account report is given to Chairman of the Pioneer Company Council from School number such-and-such!" after which the such-and-such Chairman would march to the rostrum on stage with their sheet of report. The paper read up, the accounting Chairman leaves the sheet to Secretary of the Meeting, because what's the point in sticking all those figures down on the fly if they are written already, right?.

At first, everything went without a hitch. I and Secretary of Account Meeting, a girl in her ceremonial white shirt and the scarlet pioneer necktie, as anyone else around, were sitting next to each other behind the small desk under a dark red cloth on a small stage in a small hall, where Chairmen of the City Pioneer Companies were seated in rows waiting for their turn to read their accounts. Back in the last row, Second Secretary of the City Komsomol Committee—responsible for the work with the pioneers—sat in her red pioneer necktie.

The Chairmen in a well-oiled manner followed each other, read from their sheets, piled them by Secretary of Account Meeting, and returned to the audience. I also did my part as instructed but after the fourth announcement, something suddenly came over me or rather flooded over me. My mouth got full of overflowing saliva, I barely had time to gulp it before the salivary glands fountained out a new excessive portion to fill me with shame before Secretary of Account Meeting seated near me who had to surely be perplexed by my obvious hurried gulping. A spell

of ease came when she went to account for School 10, yet, with her return, the disgraceful torture went on. What's wrong with me, after all?!.

Then came my turn. Walking back those 4 steps from the rostrum, I swallowed 3 times, which did not help though. Okay, let School 14 finish and…Oh, no! Second Secretary too, with her concluding speech!.

> (…in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn't realized yet that all my grieves and joys and stuff sprang from that rascal in the unfathomably distant future who's now composing this letter to you stretched on my back inside this here one-person tent surrounded by a dark forest in the middle of nowhere and the never subsiding whoosh of the river currently named Varanda…)

In October, the seventh-graders started their preparation for getting admitted to the ranks of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, aka ALYCL, aka Komsomol. The membership in Komsomol organization was not a cheap giveaway passed out indiscriminately to lined-up squads or companies. Not in the least! You had to prove that you deserved that high honor at the special admittance sitting of the City Komsomol Committee whose Members would ask you questions as in a real examination because on entering this youth organization you became an ally to the Party and a would-be communist.

For a preparatory reading up, the Senior Pioneer Leader of our school, Volodya Gourevitch—a pretty young man with black hair and bluish-skinned cheek-and-jowls because of the thick but always close shaved bristle—distributed among the would-be members the Charter of ALYCL printed in the smallest typeface so as to pack all of its sections into a small accordion-folding leaflet. He also warned that at the Admittance Sitting the City Komsomol Committee Members were especially keen about the Charter Section on the rights and duties of the Komsomol members.

Volodya Gourevitch graduated from the prestigious School 11, between the Station and the Under-Overpass, as well as the class of playing button-accordion at the Konotop Music School. He dwelt in City, rather far from the Settlement, in a compact block of five-story buildings between Peace Square and Square of the Konotop Divisions, which area among the local folks was, for some reason, referred to as Palestine.

On his arrival to school from Palestine, he donned mixed paraphernalia of a very clean and well-ironed pioneer necktie and the golden profile of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's bald head and resolutely pointed wedge beard in the red enamel banner of the small badge of a Komsomol member pinned in the breast of his jacket. At shop-talks within the close circle of pioneer activists, Volodya Gourevitch liked to frequently announce, emphasizing his and the Leader of the Revolution coincidence in both name and patronymic, "Call me simply – Ilyich." Following these words sounded his hearty laugh, loud and protracted, after which his lips did not immediately pulled back to the neutral position and he had to assist by pushing his thumb and forefinger at the short saliva threads in the corners of his mouth.

However, Volodya Sherudillo, a firmly built champion at Bitok gambling with the red turf of hair and a thick scatter of freckles in his round face, who studied in my class, in the close circle of us, his classmates, called Volodya Gourevitch – "a khannorik from CEC!"

> (…at the shake-down period of the Soviet regime, before enslaving villagers into collective farms, the Communist leadership experimented about organizing rural population into fellowships of Collective Earth Cultivation, acronymically "CEC"
>
> However, the meaning of "khannorik" is not recorded even in the multi-volume *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Live Great-Russian Language* by Vladimir Dahl, probably, because the prominent linguist never visited the village of Podlipnoye.
>
> Who remembers CEC's nowadays? Yet, the collective memory of village folks still keeps them dearly and transfers from generation to generation.
>
> "***Forgotten is the reason, yet feeling is still there…"…)***

The Konotop City Komsomol Committee was located on the second floor in the right wing of the City Council building. The building itself, somehow resembling the Smolny Institute from numerous movies about the Great October Revolution, faced Peace Square past the greens and across Peace Avenue. Three short, quiet, flag-stoned, alleys beneath the umbrage of splendid chestnuts in the greens connected the building and Peace Avenue.

None of the guys from our school had any problem whatsoever at the examination on Komsomol Charter, neither had them other students of our age from the rest of the city schools, we got admitted to the Leninist Young Communist League nice and smoothly…

~ ~ ~

In autumn, they started tramway construction in the Settlement. The track ascended from the Underpass tunnel to pass Bazaar and dive under the giant poplars lined along the rough cobbles in the road of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street. Gray pillars of smooth concrete for supporting the contact wire above the tramway rose at regular intervals between the mighty tree-trunks. By the October holidays, the track had reached our school and even turned into May Day Street, which stretched to the city limit at the end of the Settlement.

Then three small streetcars started running from the terminal on the city-side of the Under-Overpass tunnel to the terminal at the end of May Day Street. Stout female conductors collected the fare in the streetcars selling a three-kopeck ticket per passenger which throwaways they tore off the narrow paper rolls fixed on the canvas strap of their plum duty bags cinched across their trunks to keep jingling change and uphold their mighty busts.

In the large streetcars that ran in the city, the driver had only one cab, in the head of the car, and on reaching a terminal stop the streetcar went around the turning loop to start its route in reverse. The Settlement tracks were not equipped with turning loops because the small streetcars had two cabs, kinda heads of a pushmi-pullyu, and at the loopless terminals, the driver simply swapped

the cabs and started back assisted by the conductor, who stood on the step in the back door pulling the robust tarp strap tied to the streetcar arc so as to flip it over because the arc should be in backward position when sliding along the contact wire over the track.

And again, if the doors in the larger streetcars were operated by the driver who slammed them automatically from her cab, then the small streetcars in the Settlement had hinged folding doors of plywood, so on reaching your stop, you pulled the middle handle in the door to fold its leaves, pushed them aside and got off, whereas in the reverse operation you pulled the handle fixed at the edge of the leaf opposite the hinges and pushed the middle handle to unfold and close the door, off we go!. But who cares for all that algorithmic trouble? That's why the streetcars in the Plant Settlement ran their routes with both doors wide open except for the spells of devastating frost. To make it possible for the streetcars to give way each other, two of the stops in the Settlement had doubled track, one such stop was by School 13 and the other in the middle of May Day Street…

The toilet in the Plant Club was on the first floor – at the far-off end in a very long corridor that started by the library door and went on and on between the blind walls on both sides, you could touch them both at once, beneath the rare bulbs in the ceiling. In the dark green paint on the walls, there occasionally happened closed doors with the glazed frame-legends: "Children Sector", "Variety Band", "Dresser Room" and, already nearing the toilet, "Gym". All the doors were constantly locked and kept staid silence, only from behind the gym door there sometimes came tap-tapping of the ping-pong ball or clangs of metal in barbell plates.

Yet, one day I heard the sounds of piano playing behind the Children Sector door and I knocked on it. From inside, there came a yell to enter, which I did and saw a small swarthy woman with a bob-cut black hair and wide nostrils, who sat at the piano by the wall of large mirror squares. Opposite the door there were three windows high above the floor and, beneath them, ballet rails ran over the ribbed heating pipe along the whole wall. The left part of the room was hidden behind a tall screen for puppet shows preceded by an unusually long and narrow, kinda refectory, table of taut thick lino in its top.

And then I said that I'd like to enroll Children Sector.

"Very well, let's get acquainted – I'm Raissa Grigoryevna, so who are you and where from?"

She told me that the former actors grew too adult or moved away to other cities, and for the Children Sector revival I needed to bring along my schoolmates. I started a canvassing campaign in my class. Skully and Kuba felt doubtful about the idea of joining the Children Sector, yet they were won over when saw the point that the long table in that room could easily be used for ping-pong playing. And a couple of girls came too out of curiosity. Raissa Grigoryevna received the newcomers with delighted welcome, and we began to rehearse a puppet show "Kolobok" based on the same-named fairy tale.

Our mentor taught us the art of controlling common hand puppets, not letting them duck below the screen, out of the onlookers' sight. We gathered at Children Sector twice a week, but sometimes Raissa missed the rehearsals or was late and on such occasions the key was to be

found on the windowsill in the room of the movies list painters whose door was never locked but kept wide open for often visits of fans of their talent and art-lovers in general... So we opened Children Sector and played ping-pong for hours, albeit with a tennis ball, across that long table. Neither had we bats, effectively replacing them with the thinner of school textbooks in hard covers and the net between the players' sectors was also made of the slightly open textbooks lined spines up, and though hard hits of tennis ball knocked them down but then restoring the net didn't take long either…

Rough and exhausting is a puppeteer's job: both mentally—you need to copy your character's clues and learn them by heart, and physically—you shouldn't ever low down your arm stretched out and aloft with the hand doll donned on your 3 fingers. During rehearsals, the acting arm grew numb because of the strenuous exertion, and even propping it with the remaining hand didn't really work. Besides, there appeared that pesky nagging crick in the neck because your head was constantly tilted upward to check the actions of the doll. But, on the other hand, after the on-stage performance, you would step out from behind the screen and come in front of it, keeping your hand inside the doll lifted up to your shoulder, and Raissa Grigoryevna would announce that it was you who acted Hare. And, following the theatrical nod of your head, Hare next to your shoulder would also give a nice bow provoking the eager laughter and applause among the audience. O, thorns! O, sweetness of the glory!.

Later on, many of the participants dropped out but the core of Children Sector—Skully, Kuba, and I—persevered. Raissa made of us actors for short performances about the heroic kids and adults from the times of the October Revolution or the Civil War. For the performances, we made up, glued real theatrical mustache on upper lips, wore army tunics, rolled cigarettes of shag and newspaper slips the way she taught us, and let the smoke in and out of our mouths without really inhaling so as not to cough. With those performances, we toured the bigger shop floors in the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, the ones that had Red Corner rooms for meetings where, during the midday break, we acted on tiny stages before the workers eating their midday meal out of newspaper packages. More than anything else, they enjoyed the moment with hand-rolled cigarettes…

Twice a year Club staged a major amateur concert where the Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich, recited heartfelt poems dedicated to the Communist Party. The pupils of Anatoly Kuzko, the teacher at the button-accordion class by Club, played their achievements.

Yet, the creamy crest of the concert program was dancing numbers by the Ballet Studio because their trainer Nina Alexandrovna enjoyed a well-deserved reputation which attracted students from all over the city. Besides, Club possessed a rich theatrical wardrobe so that for the Moldovan dance of Jock the dancers appeared in skin-tight pants and silk vests spangling with sequin, and for the Ukrainian Hopuck, they wore hugely wide trousers and soft ballet boots of red leather.

The accompaniment for them all, including young girls in ballet tutus, was provided by virtuoso accordionist Ayeeda standing behind the scenes of the stage. And there, next to her, stood also we, in army tunics and adult makeup, marveling how classy she played without any sheet music.

The handsome electrician Murashkovsky recited comical rhymed *humoreskas* and sang in duet with the bald tenor, a turner from the Mechanical Shop, “Two Colors of My Life” in Ukrainian. On Murashkovsky’s right hand there missed three fingers – only the pinky one and the thumb stayed in place and, to hide the deficit, he clutched a spiffy handkerchief between them like an extrinsic catch grabbed by a crab claw.

Two elderly women sang romances, not in a duet but in turn, accompanied by the button-accordion of Anatoly Kuzko himself, whose eyes were sooner astray than crossed, when he eye-contacted you with one of them, the other was looking straight into the ceiling.

For the concluding peak of the concert, Aksyonov, the blonde Head of the Variety Band, and his musicians came to the stage thru the dark of the auditorium. The drums and double bass were already waiting there in the small makeup room behind the stage for their invigorated players, but his saxophone Aksyonov was bringing himself.

Blonde Jeanne Parasyuk, also, by the way, a graduate from our school, performed a couple of popular hits accompanied by the Variety Band and the concert ended with the all-out applause and eager shouts “encore!”

The auditorium at those events was filled to the brim, like for a show of some popular two-sequel Indian film. The stage was inundated by the light of lamps sitting along its edge as well as from those above it, and the blinding beams of searchlights from both balconies. In the dark passage along the wall beneath the balcony, the Ballet Studio dancers kept trotting to the Dressing Room of auntie Tanya on the first floor, to change their stage clothes for the following numbers.

For acting our short performances, Raissa trained us how to appear on stage from behind the scenes and get out without turning your back to the spectators, and how to look into the hall – not at someone in particular but just so, in general, somewhere between the fifth and sixth rows. Although in the crude glare of the searchlights directed into your face from the balconies thru the dark hall, you could hardly make out anyone after the fourth row, and even those in the first one looked fairly blurred…

So Club became a part of my life and if I didn’t show up home for a long time after school, they didn’t worry – I was dawdling at Club as usual….

In the dark of winter nights, we got together for hanging out along the streetcar track because our favorite pastime became riding the streetcar “sausage”, so was called the tubular grille hanging under the driver cab. We ambushed a streetcar at the stop, neared from behind and, when it started rolling forward, we jumped onto the “sausage”, grabbing at the small ledge under the windshield of the empty driver cabin. The narrow ledge provided nothing to catch a hold at, and you strained your fingers to the utmost seeking some absent point of vantage in its smooth surface. The streetcar rolled and rumbled, and bumped on the rail joints, the springy “sausage” jumped up and down under your feet – wow! Super!

The speediest stretch in the track was between Bazaar and School 13. It’s where the streetcars fancied being racing cars and it was there that once my fingers grew too numb and began

slipping off the smooth ledge, but Skully shouted, “Hold on!” and pressed them back with his palm, but in a minute Kuba cried, “Kapets!” because his fingers also slipped off, and he jumped from the “sausage” shooting along at full speed. Fortunately, he didn’t ram against the trunk of some huge poplar and he caught up with us jogging from the darkness, while the streetcar waited at the stop for its counterpart coming from the Settlement, so we went on riding without losses...

The attraction was not exclusively our hobby-horse though but in common ownership of the Settlement guys. At times there collected a whole bunch of “sausage”-riders so that the springy grille began to scrape the railheads. At longer stops, the conductors got off the car in an attempt at driving us away. We fled into the frosty winter night, yet as the streetcar started off the stop, we lighted back onto the grille before the means of public transportation gained full speed…

~ ~ ~

One day the classes for our 7th “B” were canceled because we walked for an excursion to the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant.

First of all, we visited the Plant Fire Brigade which was not too far from the Main Check-Entrance. Thence we proceeded to the shop floor for filling tall cylinder iron tanks with oxygen.

In the Smithy, no explanations were audible behind the deafening hum of giant fans and the roar of fire in the brick furnaces from which black-overalled workers were pulling with tremendous tongs huge glowing slugs and carrying them by jib cranes onto the anvils under hydraulic hammers.

Our class stood for a while and watched the worker turning by his steely tongs a big white-hot slug upon the anvil, this way and that way, under the mighty strikes of huge hammer shooting with dinosaurous puffs from above, between its oily stands, to shape the needed form. The floor vibrated from the tremor sent about by the hammer bangs. Flakes of metal fell off the workpiece while it got darker, changing color to scarlet, then to dark cherry. But the most surprising was the sensitiveness of the hammer which could also strike very lightly, and even stop halfway in its sharply accelerated fall. It was operated by a woman in a kerchief on her head, who used just a pair of levers sticking from the juggernaut’s side frame.

On our way out of the shop past another, silent, hydraulic hammer I saw a scattering of round metal tablets the size of a jubilee ruble, only thicker. I liked their pleasant lilac color, besides, such a tablet would do for a good *bitok* to turn kopecks over in the game for money. Moreover, the pieces were surely just a waste if thrown there on the floor. I picked one up and dropped at once – it badly burned my fingers. A passing-by worker laughed and said, “What? Too heavy, eh?”

And in the Mechanical Shop Floor, I was impressed by a planing machine in a low narrow frame, scraping off, in no hurry, shavings from the clamped metal plate. The astounding feature about the machine tool was its bas-relief boilerplate – “Manufactured in Riga in 1904.” From before the Revolution! And still working!. Farther along, there stood a large Soviet machine tool,

also a planer, its cutter kept traveling long runs and the worker sat next to it in a chair just watching idly. Some nice job, huh?

When at home I shared my impressions from the excursion, Mother said I might start taking shower at some of Plant's shop floors instead of going to the City Bathhouse behind Square of the Konotop Divisions. Then she asked if I knew that Vadya Kubarev's mother worked at the Plant cooling tower and that would simplify access to the tower's shower room.

I discussed the idea with Skully who told that all his life he had been going to Plant on his bath days, and there were shop floors with better shower rooms than that at the cooling tower. The majority of the showers worked only till eight at night but those in the shop floors with three work shifts were open round the clock. Of course, they might not allow us to Plant at the Main Check-Entrance but who cared about going that way? There remained 24/7 free access to the territory thru the Plant rear end, along the tracks where the cars were pulled in for repair and the repaired ones pulled out. Yet, there was no need to go even that far, because the high concrete wall along Professions Street was full of convenient stiles for the workforce to easily take home *shabashkas* after their working day.

> (…and again I have to break out from the consequently flowing timeline, and take a jump from Konotop to the Varanda River, how otherwise would a metropolitan woman from the third millennium understand the everyday provincial lingo of the last century?
>
> At times even the Dahl's Dictionary is of little help. Although he correctly noted that the word "shabash", aka Sabbath, was used to signal the end of work, yet no further revelations beyond that point. It took the Russian language another hundred years and adapting to the era of developed socialism in the country to produce "shabashka" from the Sabbath.
>
> *Shabashka* is some product manufactured at workplace to take and use it at home or, at least, a bundle of timber pieces acquired and chopped at work for burning in the stove of the worker's *khutta*. Hauling the *shabashka* home is the period, sort of, to mark the end of a working day.
>
> How do you estimate my etymological efforts?. Well, and since I'm here, perhaps, it's time to crawl into this one-person Chinese pagoda of mine. What I do like about it are these folding bamboo rods. Some cleverly designed gizmo – a dozen half-meter tubes assemble into the pair of three-meter-long elastic poles to stretch the tent over them. And this mosquito net at the entrance works fine – zip it up, and no mosquito can fly in. Buzz outside, bloodsuckers! Fig at you!
>
> Now I'll take off my shirt and pants, get into this sleeping bag "Made in Germany", get warm and all the king's men can't make you feel cozier.
>
> It feels good when such an ancient civilization and so technocratic nation, from East and West, work for you. Although, when you come to think about it, these 2 are only manufacturers who put to use the ideas accumulated by the humans as a whole. Any

widget, even the most sophisticated one, rolled out by this or that advanced nation is the mutual achievement of mankind, to which the Amazonia Indians contributed also by the mere fact of their existence. But they, just like me, have to pay for things from public domain.

Look at this zipper here: you know who invented it? Me neither, but hardly they were the Liang Jin dynasty or, say, Kaiser Wilhelm…)

~ ~ ~

The stage is a complex mechanism, in addition to the block system for operating the curtains, besides the electrical board full of fuses, switches, buttons to control its diverse illumination, you will also find up there, high above the stage, a whole cobweb of metal beams for hanging drops, lamps and side wings.

At concerts, we not only stood beside virtuoso accordionist Ayeeda, and not only shot the breeze with Moldovan-Ukrainian peacocks made in the Ballet Studio before their dance was announced, no, we were also exploring the mysterious world of the backstage. There was discovered a vertical iron ladder to a short catwalk, from which you could climb the beams under the roof and cross over to the opposite side of the stage, where was another catwalk but without any ladder, so retrace your Tarzan-walk thru the flies you, short-sighted Chung!.

But still, what possibly could be there – behind that lumber partition stretched high above the stage from one wall to the other? Ha! The attic must it be! Over the auditorium!.

And thus was conceived and matured the plan for getting free access to movie shows at Club – thru the attic to the catwalk, down the ladder to the stage, wait for the lights to go out, dive under the screen, take a vacant seat, sit back and enjoy the show!

On the first floor of Club, next to the movies list painters' room there was a door eternally ajar to the Plant territory where the Club wall got furnished with a comfortable iron stairway running up to the very roof that had a dormer for easy access to the attic. So, it only remained to penetrate the plank partition which separated attic from the stage. Kuba, for some reason, refused to participate in moving the problem of penetration out of the way to free cinema and the realization of so brilliant a plan was left to me and Skully.

Before long, one dark and windy winter night, we smuggled the ax from the Skully's shed to the Plant territory over one of frequent stiles in the concrete wall. Without any delay or obstacle, we approached the Club building, climbed to the attic and looked around…

The extensive space harbored some incomprehensible metal disk in the middle, about 2-3 meters in diameter and somewhat-less-than-a-meter tall, under a one-piece cover also of metal, a kinda jumbo casserole lid. Moving it tad bit aside, we discovered that the disk was hollow and its round bottom much deeper than you might suppose considering the object from outside. The frequent narrow slits cut the bottom in a spoke-wise pattern reaching neither the hub not the rim in the unknown contraption. The location of the "casserole"-disk as well as the outline of the slits

in the bottom suggested that it was from where the giant chandelier adorned with dangling pieces of milky glass hung into the auditorium. The guess was promptly confirmed by the burst of dogged assault-rifles rounds interspersed by booms of explosions coming up thru the slits—a war movie down there turned an accomplice in our not strictly legitimate intentions.

The prowling circle of light carved in the darkness by a flashlight frisked over the leveled layer of cinder for thermal isolation ahead of our sneaking feet to where the plank partition crossed the attic. Deducting the approximate location of the catwalk screened by the sturdy planks, we started to split and break them so as to produce, by application of the ax, a sizable hole. The wood turned out rather hard, besides, our work was slowed down at lulls in the combat actions underneath.

It's only after splitting one of the planks in two halves, we realized the additional problem we had run into—the supposed partition was, actually, a double wall of planks with a sheet-iron layer sandwiched between 2 wooden partitions. You can't cut iron with an ax, that's why we failed to make a manhole to the magnificent world of the art of motion pictures. The builders of yore knew their job all right, I warrant…

As it turned out, and pretty soon too, the whole manhole plan was not needed at all, because Raissa taught us taking pass-checks from the Club Director.

About six in the evening, Pavel Mitrofanovich was, as a rule, already jolly screwed, and when someone from the Children Sectorians appeared in his office with a humble petition, he tore a page-wide slip off a sheet of paper on his desk and, snuffling his nose so as to keep in check the booze on his breath, wrote an illegible line yielding "let in 6 (six) people" when deciphered, or any other number of those who wanted to watch the show on that day. Then he added his ornate signature running much longer than the previous line.

When the show began, we went up to the second floor and handed the precious scrap of paper to auntie Shura, who unlocked the treasured door to the balconies, suspiciously comparing our quantity to the hieroglyphics in the pass-check…

The Club Director was short and thickset without having a pot-belly though. His slightly swollen, and oftentimes ruddy, face was accompanied by the combed back grayish hair with a natural wave. When the Club stuff together with the amateurs from the Plant staged a full-length performance of the Ostrovsky's *At the Advantageous Place*, the Club Director just parted his hair in the middle of his head, smeared it with Vaseline and turned out a better than natural Czar-times Merchant for the play.

Electrician Murashkovsky acted Landowner and appeared on stage in a white Circassian coat, constantly clutching a riding-whip, instead of a handkerchief, in his thong of the disfigured hand.

Even the Head of Children Sector, Eleonora Nikolayevna, partook in the full-length production of that classic play. Her position at Club was unmistakably higher than that of Raissa, who was the Artistic Director of Children Sector and reported to Eleonora because the latter appeared in Children Sector much seldomer. On those visits, as elsewhere, she invariably arrived in dangling

earrings studded with tiny bright sparklers, as well as in an immaculate white blouse with a lace collar, which rigging was further emphasized by mannerly retarded movements of her hands, in contrast to the energetically Plebeian gesticulation of Raissa.

The only occasion when I saw Eleonora without those tiny shining strips hanging from her ears was in the one-act play, where she was acting the underground communist caught by the White Guards. The Whites locked her in the same prison cell with a criminal, acted by Raissa, and Eleonora converted her into a Communist supporter before Stepan, Club House Manager, together with Head of Variety Band, Aksyonov, both in white Circassian coats and ballet high boots, took her away to face the firing squad…

If the Club Director was absent from his office, I had to buy a ticket like mere mortals from the ticket office next to his locked door. On one of such occasions, I entered the common auditorium and chose to land into a seat right in front of two girls, my classmates, Tanya and Larissa, because even though in the sold tickets they always marked the row and the place no one paid much attention to those marks.

Sometime before, I secretly liked Tanya, but she seemed overly unattainable, so I pulled wisely up and switched over to courting Larissa. After the classes at school, I tried to catch up with her in Nezhyn Street because she also went home that way. However, she invariably walked together with Tanya, her close girlfriend and also a neighbor in their Maruta Street.

When Larissa was a participant in Children Sector, I once happened to see her along Professions Street to the Gogol Street corner because she did not allow going with her any farther. At that period Tanya also participated in Children Sector activities and there, actually, were 3 of us walking Professions Street. On the way, Tanya kept urging Larissa to walk faster but then she just got angry and went ahead alone.

The 2 of us parted at the aforesaid corner, and I went along Gogol Street enthusiastically recollecting Larissa's sweet laugh in response to my silly yakety-yak. On reaching the ice-coated water pump under the lamppost at the Nezhyn Street corner, all of my enthusiasm evaporated because of the two black figures, contrasting crisply against the white snow, who called me to come up.

I recognized both, one was a guy from the parallel class, and the other – Kolesnikov, a tenth-grader from our school, they both were from somewhere about Maruta Street. In a privately threatening tone, Kolesnikov began to make me understand that if I ever would come up to Larissa again and if he ever would hear or be told that I dared then, well, in general, I should get it what he would do to me. And so he kept rehearsing those general concepts in a circle, with slight variations in their order of priority, when I suddenly felt something snatching at my calf. I thought that was a street dog and looked back, but there was only a snowdrift and nothing else. That's where and when the meaning of the idiom "hamstring shaking with fear" came to me completely.

He asked again if I understood, and I muttered that I got it. Then he asked if I understood everything of what he meant. I mumbled that, yes, everything. But I didn't look at their faces and

thought how good it would be if Uncle Tolik, the former regional welterweight champion in weightlifting, came to the pump for water. No, he never appeared. On the morning of that day, I fetched enough water to our *khutta*…

And now in public, before the pretty crowded auditorium, I took the seat in front of the two girls, my classmates, even though being fully aware of all the imprudence of such a move, yet, for some reason, unable to behave differently. I turned to them and tried to start a talk in the general hubbub of the audience present. However, Larissa kept mum and looked aside, and only Tanya was responding in rather a monosyllabic way before Larissa herself addressed me directly, "Stop following me, I'm laughed at by the guys because of you!"

Unable to find a word to answer her, crushed and dumb-stricken, rose I to my feet and walked away along the blind wall to the exit, carrying within my chest the fragments of my broken heart.

When I was nearing the back rows in the auditorium, my black sadness got drowned in the downright darkness because the lights went out to start the movie. To let my eyes get accustomed to the dark and prevent stumbling, I for a second took an empty seat by the passage and forgot to go and carry on my grief and pain because "Winnitoo the Chief of Apaches" was starting!.

~ ~ ~

At 19 Nezhyn Street, the old man Duzenko was no more and that part of the *khutta* was dwelt already by two old women: Duzenko's widow and her sister who moved in from her village.

And in the half-*khutta* belonging to Ignat Pilluta there remained only his widow, Pillutikha. She never stuck her nose outside her den, keeping the window shutters in Nezhyn Street closed for weeks on end. Sure enough, she had to visit Bazaar or the Nezhyn Store but my treads never crossed hers…

In February Grandma Katya all of a sudden was taken to the hospital. Probably, only for me, with my life split between school, Club, books, and the TV it happened suddenly. Trying to get everywhere leaves no time to see things right by your side.

Coming from school, I clinked the latch-hook in the wicket, trotted to and up our two-step porch past Pillutikha's window with a profile glimpse of her standing figure cloaked in a black shawl hung loosely from her head, her hand menacingly aloft against the wall between her and our kitchens.

At home, I dropped the folder with school notebooks into the crevice between the folding couch-bed and the cabinet under the TV and went back to the kitchen to have a midday meal with my sister-'n'-brother, if they hadn't had it yet. Mother and Aunt Lyouda cooked separately for their families, and Grandma Katya ate the meals by her youngest daughter, together with her younger grandkids, Irochka and Valerik, at the common kitchen table by the wall between our and Duzenko's parts of the *khutta*.

In the daytime, there was nothing on television but the frozen circle and squares for adjusting image by small knobs at the back of the TV box, if the circle was uneven then the announcers' faces would be flattened or overly long. That's why until the All-Union Television started to broadcast at 5 o'clock the TV was turned off and the midday meal was eaten under the muffled drum-roll-like chant from behind the wall to the Pillutikha's, whose blather at times peaked up into piercing but indistinct shrieks.

Then I went to Club and, coming back, again saw Pillutikha, back-lit by a distant bulb in the room, she never turned on the light in the kitchen where she stood up against the hateful wall. After all the 4 parents of our *khutta* returned from work, Pillutikha would increase her volume to which the usual comment from Father was, "Ew! Again that Goebbels at her hurdy-gurdy!"

Once Uncle Tolik put a large teacup to the wall to hear what she was croaking about. I also pressed my ear to the cup bottom, the gabble got nearer and sounded already not from behind the wall but inside the white teacup, yet remained as thick as before. Mother advised not to pay attention to the half-witted old woman, and Aunt Lyouda explained that Pillutikha was putting curses on all of us thru the wall. She turned to that same wall and pronounced with perfect poise, "Be all of that back to your bosom!"

I don't know whether Pillutikha was crazy indeed. She managed to live alone, after all. By the end of the war, her daughter left Konotop for the safety's sake, to avoid troubles for her cheerful behavior with the officers at the German Company Headquarters lodging in her parents' *khutta*. Pillutikha's son Grisha was doing his ten-year stretch in prison for some murder. Her husband died; no TV by her side. Maybe, she kept cursing so as not to go nuts, who knows…

Grandma Katya never commented or said anything about Pillutikha, she only smiled a guilty smile. On some days she moaned occasionally but not louder than the muffled Goebbels' speeches from behind the wall… And suddenly an ambulance arrived and she was taken to the hospital.

Three days later they brought Grandma Katya back and laid her on the leatherette-covered mattress-couch, constructed from the remains of the big sofa brought from the Object and put under the window in the kitchen, opposite to the brick stove. She did not recognize nor spoke to anyone, and only moaned loudly. In the evening our two families gathered in front of the TV and shut the door to the kitchen to cut off her moans and heavy smell. The Arkhipenkos moved their beds to the room and it became a bedroom for 9.

The next day the ambulance was called again, but they did not take her away and only made an injection. Grandma Katya quieted for a short time but then again began to sway from side to side on her couch, repeating the same screams, "Oh, God! Ah, probby!" A few years later I guessed that "probby" was a shortened Ukrainian "forgive me, God".

Grandma Katya was dying for 3 days.

Our families stayed at neighboring *khuttas*; the Arkhipenkos at Number 15, and we at 21, in the half of Ivan Kreepak. Older neighbors were giving our parents indistinct advice about breaking

out the threshold to our *khutta*, or some of the floorboards inside it. The most common-sense proposal made Ivan Kreepak's wife, auntie Tamara. She said that the couch with Grandma Katya stood under the window with a half-open leaf above her head, and the fresh air flow protracted the sufferings of the poor thing.

That same evening, Mother and Aunt Lyouda dropped into our *khutta* to grab more blankets, then they put out the light and got out onto the porch. There Aunt Lyouda neared the kitchen window and closed the leaf tightly. Then she stealthily stepped down to Mother and me—I was holding the blankets—with a smile of a naughty girl on her face, or so it seemed in the dark moonless night.

In the morning Mother woke us, sleeping on the floor in the living-room of Kreepak's *khutta*, with the news that Grandma Katya died.

The funeral was the next day. I did not want to go, but Mother said I should. I was burning with shame. It seemed to me that everyone knew that Grandma Katya was suffocated by her own daughters. That's why I let loose the ear-flaps of my rabbit-fur hat and pulled it over my eyes. And so I went all the way from our *khutta* to the cemetery, keeping my guilty head low, and looking at the feet of those who walked ahead of me.

It's possible though that no one ever guessed that such my stance was caused by shame and not because of the strong wind slapping my face with icy pellets.

At the cemetery, under the shrill crying of the three trumpets over the uneven mound of snow mixed with black earth lumps, all Grandma Katya's children were sobbing too, both Mother, and Aunt Lyouda, and even Uncle Vadya.

> (…living on, we harden more and more, someday I'll grow less sensitive than those iron crackers from the thread-bare scrip of the wanderer in search for her beloved Finist the Falcon Radiant…)

The news of the Yuri Gagarin's death shattered us, though not so tragically as the death of Vladimir Komarov eleven months before him – getting harder we had learned already that astronauts were also mortal. The TV announcer, keeping his eyes down to the sheet of text on his desk, read that in a training jet plane flight, Gagarin together with his partner-pilot Sehryogin crashed when approaching the airfield. Then he looked up thru his thick-lensed black-rimmed glasses and declared the All-Union mourning.

When a person reads from a sheet of paper it does not mean that they hide the eyes to conceal their shame, they just do their job, how else would we know the news? Shortly before Gagarin's death, I heard in the adults' gossip that after all, he didn't live up to what you'd call an impeccable hero, because he became too vain and proud, and he cheated on his wife. Consider, for instance, that wide scar in his eyebrow which appeared after his jump from a lover's apartment on the second floor.

> (…but who's interested today in all those rumors, be they true or false?

For my son Ahshaut, and so for all of his generation, Gagarin is just a name from a history textbook, as for me was, say, Marshal Tukhachevsky.

Orbited the Earth? Well, OK, good job.

Got executed by a firing squad? Well-well, bad luck.

However, for me Gagarin is not a textbook but a part of my own life and, as long as I'm alive, I am interested to find out what happened, how and why. And, when digging for certain facts, it's hard not to fall in love with Internet search engines. The only venue for getting info then was the radio-voices from behind the crackle-'n'-burst static 24/7 or the yarn by Zone old-timers. The first was effectively unreadable, like the Pilutikha curses inside the pottery pressed to the wall, the lack of exact dating and absence of references made the eye-withesses's tales sound fairly mythological. Still and yet, even before the rise of Netscape, I managed to learn that his attitude to the superiors in the chain of command grew markedly conceited after cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov returned to the Earth in form of a scorched firebrand…

Vladimir Komarov knew that he would not survive his space flight because his backup, Yuri Gagarin, when inspecting the spaceship Voskhod, found two hundred technical flaws which he listed in a written report of ten pages. He passed the report thru his higher commanders to Leonid Brezhnev, the then Ruler of the USSR. The commanders held the report by them, they knew that Brezhnev would never agree to postpone the launch date taking risks that Americans might get ahead of the Soviet Union in the space flight race.

Komarov could refuse to go to his obvious death, but then the doomed spaceship would be manned by his backup and personal friend, Yuri Gagarin. On the doomsday morning, Gagarin appeared at the launch pad wearing an astronaut spacesuit and demanded that he be sent instead of Komarov, but he was not listened to…

After the burial of Komarov's ashes in the Kremlin wall, next to the ashes of Marshal Malinovsky, Gagarin's behavior became extremely defiant and uncontrolled. By unconfirmed rumors, at one of the government banquets, Yuri Gagarin splattered his glass of vodka into Brezhnev's face.

Americans rule out the plausibility of such an incident not because of the lack of perspicacity inherent in the mixed up nation taking root in simpletons unable to survive among the population of their origin but because of the different grammar. Since in the Russian language "mother" and "death" are of the same grammatical gender, for a Russian mujik, consciously or unconsciously, there feels some similarity in the 2. Well, how to plausibly bring over the meaning of "Death-Mommy" to Americans if all they've got is just "Mr. Death"? Not anything fits into one's mind until they got it under their skin… As a tangent effect, they shove an anti-tank mine under their belt and with the cry, "Try to bear me back, Mom!" throw themselves under the trucks of advancing

tank… Then go and rack your brains over the mystery of the Russian soul. To crack the riddle check the language rules…

Unruly Gagarin was not expelled from the Cosmonauts' Group – he already belonged to the entire Planet. He continued to attend the classes, flew jets in training flights. Did he realize that the countdown for his extermination had been already set a-ticking? I think, yes, he did. Cosmonauts were selected not only for physical but mental fitness as well. He did not only know when and where…

On March 27, 1968, Yuri Gagarin was killed in a plane crash near the village of Novosyolovo, Kirzhach District, Vladimir Region.

On that the foggy morning, the MIG jet was coming in from the training flight, before the airfield there remained a couple of minutes of flight at the altitude of 500 meters, when from the low clouds the SU jet dropped down, though by the flights plan for that morning she was supposed taking flight at the altitude of 14 kilometers in a completely different compass.

Operated by the experienced test pilot, the huge, in comparison to the training aircraft, SU jet flashed by, too close to the MIG preparing for landing. The MIG, captured by turbulence, twirled like a sliver in the breaker, entered a tailspin and collapsed into the forest. The sound of the explosion reached the airfield.

Let them endowed with ears hear. Fadeyev – Khrushchev, Gagarin – Brezhnev.

Let them capable of reckoning get it…

But again I forked off and the story of my life got entered by strangers I never have met and only recently started to see that they are also a part of me.

So much for bemoaning the belated wisdom, let's get back to the twentieth century, year sixty-eight, when I am in my fourteenth year and…)

...and how not to resent them those Czechs who succumbed to the CIA subversive propaganda and started a counterrevolution in the fraternal camp of the socialist countries! And they so inhumanely lined baby carriages to block the way before our tank bucketing along. Of course, the driver turned abruptly, in case there were babies inside, the tank fell off the bridge and our soldier died. So the Central TV news program "Time".

Then, of course, the Czech Communist Party restored the order in their country with the assistance of military contingents from the fraternal states, and we again began to live on, the camp of socialism properly united…

By the by, the Konotop of that period outstripped many of the larger cities in the field of television because by us the TV boxes had two working channels. The first was the Central Television broadcasting the news program "Time", and the main New Year entertainment

program “The Little Blue Light”, and the contest of teams at the Club of Jolly and Resourceful, aka CJR, and the live hockey matches. The other channel was the Konotop TV studio which broadcast only in the evening when people were back home from work, yet it demonstrated movies much oftener than on Central Television.

The TV-sets in those years were all black-and-white and color ones you could only see in color films from the Western Europe, for that reason Father installed a sheet of transparent isinglass over the TV screen. The sheets of that kind had certain color tints in some of its areas – the upper part blue for the sky, the lower one green for the grass. They even said that thru that isinglass the announcers’ faces looked of more natural color than without it. I could not discern any of the mentioned subtleties though never considered myself colorblind. Such mica sheets became a fashion throughout Konotop, and Uncle Tolik brought one for our TV from the Repair Base, aka the RepBase, where he worked on a milling machine tool. The RepBase specialized in renovating choppers so there they certainly had a better notion in the advanced matters like isinglass and stuff…

For switching TV channels you turned clockwise or counter it the biggest knob under the screen, it clicked and moved to the next of the fourteen positions. However, in the afternoon both the Central Television and Konotop TV Studio showed the same mute tuning circle, while to switching the knob outside those two channels the tube responded by an unbearable sizzling noise and jumping streaks of white against coarse-grained “snow” background.

And (returning to the available two channels) every day at 3 pm., the technicians at Konotop TV Studio switched on some music for about 30 minutes or so: “The Nocturne” by Tariverdiyev, the hits of Valery Obodzinsky or Larissa Mondrus served a soundtrack for the irreplaceable fine-tuning circle. We—Sasha, Natasha, and I—always switched the TV on at that time to have some music in the *khutta* though the tape-recorded numbers changed rarely if ever at all, and we knew beforehand which record would follow this or that particular song…

Besides, Konotop then was flooded with a wealth of indie radio stations that went on air in the MW range. There was both “The King of the Cemetery” and “Caravel”, and whichever name an independent guy would choose to call his underground station. They all had a common weak point though, which was their irregularity. You had no idea when to switch the receiver on so that to hear, “Hello to all, the radio station "Jolly Stickman” is now on air. Who hears me, confirm…” And he would put on the hoarsely roaring Vysotsky’s songs about the Archer who disgraced the Czar, or how we shoot thru the time in a spaceship, or about a dolphin’s belly ripped open by the boat propeller…

At some point, the radio station “Charming Nina” would cut into the broadcast and begin to point out to "Jolly Stickman” that he had sat on another guy’s wavelength, and that “Charming Nina” had been airing in that particular length for no less than a week. Little by little, they developed a quarrel: “Hey, you! Don’t swell too much! Look out, if I catch you in City you’ll have two blobs in place of your ears!”

“Easy, mini-Willie! Who do you roll a barrel against? Haven’t leaked into your pants wet for a whole week?”

“The more you rant the more you’ll weep!”

“Close it up!”

Yet, they never switched over to four-letter words.

Father claimed that even our radio set could be readily converted into such a station, smooth and easy, if only there was a microphone. However, my and Skully’s wheedling of him the mentioned conversion, and we’d sure get a mike somewhere, met his downright refusal because it was radio hooliganism, and special vehicles were stalking the city to track those hooligans down, and fine them, and confiscate all the radio equipment from their *khuttas*, down to the TV box. We didn’t want to stay without our TV, didn’t we?

At times, the radio-hooligans instead of wished-for Vysotsky's songs entered into endless negotiations about who had which capacitor and which diodes he’d trade it for. Finally, they agreed to meet in Peace Square.

“How’d I know you?”

“Don’t worry. I know you. I’ll come up.”

And so we fell back to the TV tuning circle and listened, for the hundredth time, the same, yet more reliable, Obodzinsky…

~ ~ ~

Peace Square in front of the same-named movie theater was bounded by long five-story parallelepipeds of apartment blocks. The shallow round pit in its enclosure of gray granite ring located centrally contained the large fountain which was turned on no sooner than once in a couple of years to shoot up a high white jet of water for an hour or two. The asphalt walks, lined with beautiful chestnut trees, rayed off from the wide stone steps of the movie theater porch to the opposite square corners alongside the crosswise road of Peace Avenue. The lawns beneath the chestnuts were improved by a couple of well-trodden short-cuts not provided by the original layout. Each of the tree-shaded ray-alleys was equipped with a couple of lengthy timber benches in the dark green coat of paint and two more of their breed stood openly on the asphalt nearby the fountain.

In the warm evenings, the square turned into the so-called “whore-parade” grounds for dense waves of loungers walking leisurely the alleys, they didn't leave the square and just repeated their promenade circles, again and again, scanning the faces and clothes worn by the public in the counter-directed circulation, as well as by those seated on the benches. In their evenly flowing motion, they all shuffled thru the soft dark layer, which got denser in front of the benches because both the walkers and the sitters were engaged in ceaseless persistently purposeful chewing of sunflower seeds and spitting the black inedible husk out…

Sometimes after a movie show, I also went along with the lazy stream when making for the streetcar stop around the corner. It happened not too often though because from one sequel of “Fantômas” to another you had to wait for at least six months.

In the daytime, the benches were mostly empty, though Kuba and I once happened to be called from a bench seated by a pair of young grown-up idlers who demanded kopecks. Kuba fired up trustworthy oaths that we had no money whatsoever, but I suggested to the louts, “Catch all that falls out!” With those words, I snatched the left pocket bag of my pants inside-out and expressively dusted it with my palm. I did not bother with the right pocket though, because it held ten kopecks for a streetcar fee.

The slob in sunglasses looked around and threatened with a beating, yet he didn’t leave the bench. We took it for being dismissed and went on, while Kuba kept bitterly upbraiding me for such a stupid impudence which could quite easily end in a good scrub for my silly mug, and justly too. Probably, he was right, and I had missed to figure out such an outcome, carried away with the idea of making a fine gesture – to pull an empty pocket out.

What saved me? The rogue might have decided that I was under the protection of some guy with a pull among the thieves, how, otherwise, to explain such reckless arrogance?.

“Enters Sehrguey Ogoltsoff from Konotop!” announced Raissa, when I and Skully appeared in the Children Sector room. Marking that I couldn’t catch up with that particular piece of humor, she handed me *The Pioneer* magazine opened at a story, under which at the page bottom it stood in black on white: “Sehrguey Ogoltsoff, the city of Konotop”.

I had completely forgotten about those couple sheets from a school notebook reporting on my chat with the dwarf a-straddle a pen on my desk, sent half a year before to the contest of fantasy stories announced by the magazine. The talkative dwarf chattered then of this and that making me more and more sleepy. And now, all of a sudden – wake up!

The sweet whiff of fresh typography print from the magazine pages set my head off in a slow swerve. My legs kinda weakened, and I felt a soft blow at the back of my head, only somehow from inside. Carefully, I lighted upon a seat in the 3-in-1 auditorium set put under the ballet rail beneath the windows and read the publication where there hardly remained a paragraph from what I had sent to the contest. Yes, the dwarf still was there but talked nineteen to the dozen about a certain filmmaker Ptushko I had never heard of in my life. However, neither in Children Sector nor at home had I ever shared to anyone that the story comprised practically nothing by me except for the opening settings because not every day, after all, they print your story in a thick monthly magazine…

In summertime Mother grew fat and Father, with a somewhat uneasy chortle, asked us—their children—what about having one more brother? The babe might be given a good name, like, Alyoshka, huh?

Natasha wrinkled her nose, Sasha kept silent as well, and I responded with a shrug, “What for?”

The suggested increase in the family seemed unnecessary not as a threat of deterioration our living conditions, but because of the awkward crying difference in age between the would-be parents and the suggested baby. So Father effaced his ingratiating smirk, dropped the subject and never picked it up again. A couple of weeks later, I accidentally heard Mother’s casual gossip with Aunt Lyouda, “I used the pill and the same day draft beer casks were brought to the stall, I rolled them in and – that’s it.” That way the proposed quantity changes in our generation of the Konotop Ogoltsoffs were canceled, yet Mother stayed looking fat forever…

Her stall, a round sheet-iron hut under a tin roof, was advantageously located in the main alley of the Central Park of Recreation opposite Peace Square. The heavy padlock from the back door was taken off and brought inside to start trading thru the front window whose square ledge served the counter jutting over the asphalted walk in the shade of mighty poplars.

Besides the draft beer running from the faucet which she connected by a removable hose to the dark wooden casks, in turn, the goods on sale included briquettes of packed cookies, loose candies of a couple of cheap sorts, cigarettes, lemonade and bottled wine – the Ukrainian fruit-and-berry “White Strong”, the dark-red Georgian “Rkatsiteli”, and some wine of uncertain origin named “Riesling” never asked for by anyone. “White Strong” was going out like hotcakes because of its price – one ruble and two kopecks for a half-liter bottle. Cigarettes also did not stick around for long, yet the main trade-pulling engine was draft beer. When there happened a delivery delay and they did not bring beer casks from the trade base of the Department for Workingmen Provision, aka ORS, Mother began to sigh and complain beforehand that the trade plan for her stall in the current month seemed hardly doable and they again would cut her salary…

My life rollicked on along its tracks which somehow bypassed the Central Park of Recreation, although my sister and brother occasionally boasted of dropping to Mother’s workplace for free lemonade. However, there occurred one day which I spent at the stall from its beginning to end because of the secret service agent Alexander Belov, under the guise of Johann Weiss…

In those abysmally past times, to get subscribed to *The Novel-Gazette* was next to impossible. The monthly justified its name being turned out on inexpensive newsprint and in two columns per page, yet the thickness of an issue was on a par with *The Pionee*r or *The Youth* magazines. Albeit absent from the subscription lists at the post-offices, *The Novel-Gazette* could still be found at libraries or borrowed from one or another luckier person who had asked it from the previous lucky beggar who, in their turn.... If some novel happened to be too long for one issue, it was continued in the following month. At times, deviating from the magazine name, they printed collections of stories or (quite rarely) poems, but no more than by a couple of authors per issue.

Now, getting the word of mouth that in *The Novel-Gazette* they had recently published *The Shield and Sword* by Vadim Kozhevnikov, I rushed to the Club Library and was told that all the three consequential issues were already lent out, and they had to put together the queue-list of those wishing to borrow the masterpiece. No wonder, after Mother casually mentioned some colleague lending her all the issues of the epic spy saga for 3 days, my accustomed routes got torn from where they were embedded and with the inaudible tectonic bang swayed over, re-cast, to reach their new terminal by the standard snack-stall between the hefty trunks of drowsy poplars in the center of the City Park of Recreation shadowing the main, asphalted, walk where I arrived the very next morning soon after the opening hour…

The initial issue I read in the stall, sitting on a wire box of empty bottles, before I got smart enough to move over onto a nearby bench outside, returning only to exchange the issues or act the Sale-Assistant in Mother's absence while she went to the park toilet when I even sold something.

By the end of that day, I had lived thru the career of the Soviet intelligence officer Belov, aka Johann Weiss, starting as a private in the German Wehrmacht up to an officer for special missions in the intelligence service of Abwehr.

The trade during that day was rather sluggish, because 2 days earlier the stall ran out of draft beer, and the empty casks piled up outside the back door. However, by the onset of twilight, when I moved back to the booth to finish off the final issue under a dim bulb hanging from the ceiling, at the very end of the Second World War, the flow of consumers began to increase.

That's it!. And, with the collapse of the Third Reich, I stacked all the 3 *The Novel-Gazettes* on a box by the door and saw that the trickle of customers had turned already into a tight swarm across the outside counter-ledger. There cropped thick growth of hands held up, kinda in the Nazi salutation, only balled about crushed ruble notes and handfuls of kopecks.

Mother turned to me and said, "Wait a little, I'm closing in half-hour, we'll go home together."

I sat leaning my back against the door, so as not to be in the way when she reached for goods from here and there in the stall's narrow innards.

The said half-hour later, the flurry by the stall in the park alley did not subside.

"Maman! A pair of Strong Blondes and a smaller one of cookies!"

"Auntie! Auntie! A pack of "Prima" cigarettes!"

"Sister! A bottle of white!"

"White is over."

"And over there? In that box?"

“It’s Rkatsiteli for one ruble and 37.”

“Alright, come on! Let it be it, we’re not racists!”

Finally, the Georgian was over too, the crowd dissolved. Mother dropped the window shutter but had to open again for a latecomer that tattooed in a trot under the yellow lamplight from the posts over the asphalt up to the shut stall. Grieved by the fact that everything was sold out, he bought a bottle of the uncertain expensive Riesling for 1 ruble 78 kopecks, though it was already 30 minutes past the allowed by regulations hours for selling alcohol.

When Mother locked the stall and we walked to the streetcar stop by Peace Square, I asked if such mayhem was there every evening.

“No, Sehryozha. It’s because it’s Sunday today.”

~ ~ ~

And again the summertime Kandeebynno lake awaited us but now, apart from the swimming trunks and a sandwich with a slice of melted cheese, bringing along a deck of cards became the must.

“Whose move?”

“Yours.”

"No fake?”

“Take the shoes off your eyes! It’s Skully who’s been dealing!”

“That’s a good boy! He knows it was work to shape Man out of Ape… Here, two Knaves to lazy Kuba.”

"...and ultimately will shape Man into Drab Horse… Queen and Ace of same suits.”

On each and every beach blanket spread between the currant bushes, heated battles of Throw-in Fool went on to the music from portable radios. The most enviable receiver was, of course, Spidola produced at the Riga’s Radio Plant, with the face dimensions of a copybook and no thicker than a brick. All the body of its telescopic antenna was hidden in the receiver’s plastic case leaving outside only the tip button. Pulling that button, you obtained the shiny nickel-plated rod for fishing in SW, the LW and medium-wave were caught without extending the antenna.

Browsing for radio stations in short waves was a hopeless lick though. Half of the range drowned in a sizzling, hissing, and crackling because the ours choked all those “voices” in service of the CIA—“The Voice of America”, “Liberty”, “Russian Service of BBC” and their likes—by a godawful static. So, on the beach, all the receivers were tuned to “Mayak” – the All-Union Radio

Station, which broadcast signals of the exact time and short news account every half-hour, filling the rest of the air by concerts at the requests of radio listeners…

But it's better not to visit the Kandeebynno alone, and not only because you'd stay without partners for card-playing but merely for security reasons.

Once, not heeding the advice of Kuba and Skully, I swam across the Kandeebynno to the low dam of the fish lakes. A group of guys of my age was there on the bank. One of them asked me in Ukrainian, "Have you seen Peka?"

"Who's Peka?" asked I in surprise and got an explanatory sucker punch on the chin, a kinda dab bonus for curious dumbos.

They all dived off and swam away. It did not hurt much but left a bitter resentment at such meanness on no provocation. Probably, the blades from Zagrebelya… and how, if one was allowed to ask, had I ever hurt them?

> (….in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress —I hadn't realized yet that all my grieves and joys and stuff sprang from that rascal in the unfathomably distant future who's now composing this letter to you stretched on my back inside this here one-person tent surrounded by a dark forest in the middle of nowhere and the never subsiding whoosh of the river currently named Varanda…)

The Kandeebynno was not the only place in Konotop for beach-going. There, for instance, was a sizable water-filled gully in the field beyond the Settlement. Sometimes its grassy banks got overcrowded by the guys from all over the city swarming in a flash mob for unknown reasons.

And a couple of times our friendship-knit trinity traveled by bikes to the river of Yezooch in the Konotop outskirts diagonally opposite the Settlement. The dormant flow of the stream slumbering in the shade of thick Willows over the grassy banks was almost imperceptible. And it was deep indeed, so in one place there even stood a tower for high diving. The contraption made of iron pipes had three height levels: 1, 3 and 5 meters.

We climbed the ladder to the three-meter level but it took some time to pluck the heart, and even then it was not a headlong dive but just a jump heel-first. Then we proceeded onto the plank deck at five meters, yet, having looked at the water so too far down there, silently retracted to a lower level. Even Kuba.

When leaving already, we watched an adult guy in a nice "swift-like" dive from the highest level. The only drawback of the Yezooch was its lack of beach-goers, there was no one at all except for us and that lone diver.

And, of course, the most popular place for summer recreation of Konotopers was considered the sandy Bay beach on the Seim river reached after a short, two-stop, ride from the Station by any of the local trains.

Yet, that summer I wasn't going there. Not because of the ticket price of twenty kopecks, like lots of other guys you could go there as a hidden traveler, aka "hare", the crowd of Seim-goers was too thick for the conductors to squeeze thru all the cars in just ten minutes. So expenses were not the point, neither the grim harvest of a few drownings reaped by the Seim each summer – teenager guys they mostly were, with their funerals normally attended by a huge crowd, no, I was not afraid of that because nothing of the kind could ever happen to me.

The reason was that everybody who's somebody went to the Seim on weekends – the days when Uncle Tolik and I were gone fishing. Although a couple of times we dropped over to the Bay Beach—just so along the way, the fishing rods cinched to the "Jawa" rack…

Once we even had an overnight stay not far from the Bay Beach. It happened when Uncle Tolik's brother, Vitya, came from the regional center, the city of Sumy, to propose to Natasha from Number 15 in Nezhyn Street where the Arkhipenkos stayed while Grandma Katya was dying.

Vitya was not balding like his elder brother, Uncle Tolik, no, Vitya's hair was all in place – light brown, combed straight back in the style sported by young blades at the late fifties'. He was already over thirty, but then auntie Natasha from Number 15 was not a young girl either. On the other hand, the whole *khutta* and the garden at 15, Nezhyn Street belonged to her and her two parents.

That Saturday, Uncle Tolik and I came for overnight staying with the inseparable bunch of fishing tackle to go off the next morning to fish along the Seim bank. However, at the specified meeting place, we didn't find the Moscvitch of auntie Natasha's father who had to bring the rest of the away-night partakers in his car.

To pass the time, Uncle Tolik and I visited the pioneer camp in the Pine forest at about half-kilometer from the Seim. And while Uncle Tolik rode away somewhere else – "one place, not too far off", I watched a movie in the camp open-air cinema. "A Million Years B.C." was a classy film about Tumak banished from his black-haired tribe, and another tribe, that of blonds, adopted him because he had piled a dinosaur to save a small blonde kid. When the movie ended Uncle Tolik came back from his "not too far off" and warned me to tell, if asked, that we were watching the movie together.

We returned to the appointed spot, where auntie Natasha's father had already brought her, and Aunt Lyouda with Irochka, and auntie Natasha's groom Vitya with his and Uncle Tolik's third brother. They even had set up a tent already, behind which there loomed the Moscvitch in the dark, lit by a small fire built in front of the tent.

I went down to the sand spit under the steep riverbank and touched the calm flowing water, it was so warm that I couldn't resist and entered the river. I did not dive nor swam though and only wandered, hither and thither, along the smooth sandy bottom parallel to the bank bend.

Soon Vitya and his bride came down too. He decided to take a swim, despite all her tries to sway him off the intention, and I returned to the fire to dry up, it was a full night already. Then I

crawled to the edge of the high bank over the river and looked down. Against the background of the stars glinting in the river flow, two silhouettes kissed each other – so romantic… Perhaps, my head was also seen from below, against the starry sky, because Vitya cried out "bitch!" and flung his arm.

The pebble, invisible in the dark, hit me on the forehead, I shouted "Missed!" and rolled away from the edge. Of course, I lied for had it missed, it would not hurt that much.

When the romantic couple came back to the fire, Vitya asked me, "Do you know what 'fingertips' are?"

I said I did not and he told me to stand up and, when I did, he put his fist under my chin and chucked me flat to the ground. "That's what the 'fingertips' are", said he.

Lying prostrate next to the fire, I said, "Vitya, my friend Kuba is in the habit of saying 'Don't take offense when dealing with nuts'". But I felt hurt all the same.

The women and the small Irochka slept in the car and all the rest inside the tent. In the morning, Uncle Tolik and I went to another place to fish but the catch was quite useless – not enough to feed a cat.

I didn't see Vitya anymore because his and auntie Natasha's wedding took place in the city of Sumy, and they stayed there for good….

In the middle of summer, in the middle of a week, and even in the middle of a working day, Uncle Tolik came suddenly home. "Fetch the fishing rods, quick!" yelled he, racing into the *khutta*.

Hastily cinching the tackle to the "Jawa" rack, he announced that there happened a breakage in the dam of the Kandeebynno fishery lakes and all the fish fled to the Yezooch river.

We rode across the city, shot over the bridge to Zagrebelya and only then Uncle Tolik slowed down, driving along the Yezooch in search of a vacant spot. And that was not an easy task. Along both riverbanks, the mixed crowd of boys, and youths, and grownup men were standing in almost uninterrupted line waving their fishing rods or poles towards and from the invigorated stream, jerking out empty hooks or flashing quiver of the catch.

It was a spontaneous all-out day off. It was the powerful, compelling, demonstration of angling forces of the Konotop city.

> (…up till now, I am not quite certain if the breakout from the fishery lakes was in some weird way connected to the Mad Summer '68 in France or, after all, the revolutionary situation there was triggered off by the Kandeebynno events…
>
> And lastly but also possibly, what if both developments had some third-party cause, not yet discovered but undeniably common…)

A few days later, Skully and I visited the Kandeebynno on foot. The fish lakes stretched like a vast field covered with the dingy crust of drying-up mud. Seldom spots of dark green algae were still peeping here and there. In one of such spots, there occurred a shallow, yet lengthy pit full of live fish. We were picking them out with bare hands; not very large fish though, about twenty centimeters or so. Skully did not miss bringing a mesh-bag by him, but I had to take off my tank top and tie its tail into a knot to make a sack for the catch.

At home, they fried the fish which was enough for both families and even Zhoolka had his share. Aunt Lyouda teased Uncle Tolik that he had never ever brought such a catch from his fishing tours…

~ ~ ~

Summer's the rightest time for overhaul and reconstruction works. Father cut a hole in the dead wall of the kerogas section on the veranda and inserted a hinged glazed frame. The daylight came to the section and made it more comfortable canceling the need to switch the bulb every time when dropping in to have some water.

Then came the kitchen's turn. One Sunday, everything was taken out of it into the yard, except for the too heavy refrigerator by the door. On the same day, Mother and Aunt Lyouda whitewashed all the walls, ceiling and the brick stove. They worked until finished and it was too late for bringing things in, they just washed the floor in the kitchen and everyone had to spend the night in our room.

Natasha gave up her folding bed to Irochka and Valerik, returning to her old place across the end of the folding couch-bed shared by us, her brothers. The spring mattress from the bed of the Arkhipenkos parents was put in the center of the room and there practically remained no place – you had to watch where to squeeze your step.

Sasha and I had also to go to bed, not bending as of yet our legs up to make room for our sister because Aunt Lyouda decided to take a dip in the kitchen while everyone else was watching TV.

From the things left out in the yard, she brought the mirror in the old wooden frame and returned it to its legitimate place on the wall above the fridge. Then she poured hot water into a big tin basin for washing and pulled together the striped curtains hanging in the doorway between the kitchen and the room. The light in the room was switched off so as to better see the TV screen, and the volume decreased but I still grumbled that I could not sleep with the sound on. The response, as always, was both disinterested and practical, "You don't have to be listening. Pull the blanket over your head and sleep."

Aunt Lyouda was splashing in the kitchen, then she called Uncle Tolik to rub her back. When he returned and sat, as before, upon the folding-bed filled with his children, I noticed a narrow gap left between the curtains with a glimpse of the mirror above the refrigerator containing a distanced reflection of the floorboards, half of the tin basin, and the back of Aunt Lyouda in it. And then I did what I had been told to, and pulled the blanket over my head, yet the good advice was followed no further. Instead of sleeping, I placed the blanket on the wooden armrest of the

folding couch-bed and wrinkled it up into a rigid standing ripple so as to watch from under it the sight in the faraway mirror on the opposite wall of the kitchen.

Actually, there was not much to watch – suds splotches in the wet floorboards and a slightly moving shoulder blade with the wet lock of black hair stuck to it. Then there remained only the floor and the empty half-basin left by Aunt Lyouda.

Yet, very soon she appeared again in the mirror frame—much closer and clearer—because she'd come up to it with a towel wrapped about her waist below the naked tits. She smiled a little cunning smile, licked her lips and looked straight into my eyes all the way thru my blanket periscope. I shut the eyes firmly and didn't open them anymore, while she was wiping the floor in the kitchen and coming over to the room…

Then everyone got to their beds, the TV and light were turned off. Only then I, at last, removed the hot blanket from over my head. The room was pitch dark. Soon after, various snuffling from all the sides mixed with the darkness, and from the spot where the Arkhipenkos' spring mattress was placed on the floor, there came some cautiously low crunch as if a bale of straw was getting squeezed then let go in slow rhythmic repetition.

I did not turn my head. Firstly, what the use amid such darkness? And then, after the tons of books read by me, I could tell even not seeing that they were making love down there…

Six months later, on a dark winter evening when I and Skully went to take a shower in the Plant, he called me to watch thru the windows of the female section in Plant Bath House shedding a warm yellow light on the snowdrifts in bluish darkness. I did not follow. Was I shy to do it in his presence? I don't know. But even when going alone for a shower, I never watched thru those windows…

And that same summer Raissa asked us to tour, for the old good times' sake, the city kindergartens with a puppet show. In less than a week we gave ten performances. In the morning, we came to a kindergarten indicated by her the day before, installed in their dining room the screen brought by a Plant truck, hung the backdrop, set up tripods with the hut and a forest tree, performed the show before the much-respected toddler public, and moved to the next kindergarten – the scenery on the same truck, and the actors by a streetcar.

Kuba grumbled that we were slaving at the conveyor belt for just a "thank you" because no one knew how much Raissa ripped off the directors in eye-to-eye talk in their offices at kindergartens, but I did not care. First, every day Raissa treated us to ice-cream of the most expensive Plombir flavor, and one time she took everyone to a movie show in the Vorontsov Movie Theater, and it was not her fault that "The Western Corridor" turned out such an eerie splatter film. Besides, and most importantly, the money we had earned that week wouldn't amount to the price of watching films in Club with the check-passes from Director, that we enjoyed for years after her lead…

The Club alone was not enough to satisfy my natural proclivities. Even though attending the temple of Melpomene disguised as Children Sector where the worshipers got blest by free access

to film shows (which, undeniably, enhanced their faithfulness), I felt an additional pull to architecture and the only available grounds for practicing it was our *khutta*'s yard.

The parents allowed erecting an experimental structure there propped by the fence of the Turkovs from Number 17, if and only if it would in no way block access to the shed sections in the yard, to eschew complaints from other dwellers of the *khutta*.

Together with my brother and Skully, I went after construction materials to the Grove and from among the quagmire bogs of the Swamp, we cut a couple bundles of two-meter-long whips, added to the booty a generous bunch of green twigs, cinched everything onto two bikes and transported home.

A number of the procured whips became the lattice roof secured by pieces of wire and all sorts of strings. While the roof's one edge rested on the fence, the other one was supported by the lattice wall produced of the same whips in the likewise manner. Our skills at tying knots and diligent stickability to the task in hand resulted in a crisscross-styled contraption, a kinda sturdy cage where you could pace to and fro for three steps almost without stooping. The project was accomplished and furred with the finishing layer of leafy twigs over the roof and 2 walls because the fence served the third one and the concluding, fourth, wall provided, by its absence, a conveniently wide entrance. Wow!

When entered, the structure smelt pleasantly of withering leaves and, from outside, it caressed your sight by its presence in the yard corner... A week later, the foliage wilted but the delight and ecstasy with the creative efforts drooped even earlier because there arose the unavoidable pesky question which makes each and every creator scratch the back of their head: What now?

You would not organize a clandestine pioneer group like that in The Timur's Team just because there was a suitable structure for the headquarters of such an organization in your yard, would you? Especially if you were past the age for pioneer games…

So, Skully and I switched over to our usual pastime – vain hurling of a kitchen knife into the trunk of the old Maple tree by the stack of bricks crumbling with age because that year the first Soviet Western "The Untraceable Avengers" reached, at long last, the Konotop cinemas and the Gypsy's knife swished across the silver screen to deeply stuck in the white slender trunk of a young Birch tree. In real life though, the home-made knife just bounced from the hard bark even when hitting it with the tip of its blade, and that's the meaning of being born into a wrong era after all the romantic revolutions and splendid wars dried up and left you no chance of riding a horse after the scattered enemies or shooting a fiery machine-gun to beat off their assault…

The leaves of the structure dried, blackened and fell off but the cage-like skeleton withstood another couple of years…

~ ~ ~

Still and all, my itch for architecture did not subside, but the following, inimitable, creation I built all by myself. The sheds over the Duzenko's and our earth-pit cellars stood slightly apart

and the half-meter gap between them was boarded up from the yard, yet squeezing behind the sheds, along the neighbor's fence, you got access to that narrow board-sealed cleft. That was where I built my private study room.

A piece of plywood, fixed horizontally to the aforesaid couple of boards nailed from the yard, became a decent desk squeezed between 2 walls of the blind passage. A length of plank, inserted lower the desk edge, served a stool. Absence of any other item of furniture made the interior truly Spartan, but then the study would attract no intruders, neither my sister-'n'-brother nor the little Arkhipenkos. Okay, let's imagine someone sneaked in when I was not home and… what then? Of course, Natasha made sure to check it all the same and to wrinkle her nose scoffing at my level best creation—that fairly snug and cozy nook in the inter-shed cleavage space.

On finishing construction works, there again arose the mentioned doggone question: what now, eh? Well... let's say... Aha! the place could be enjoyed for unobserved secluded speculations neither disturbed nor seen by anyone, except for Zhoolka who resented my presence on his turf, even behind the clumsy stop-boarding in the gap. And he never cared to conceal his indignation, but got upon his paws and scornfully retired, the chain rattled in his wake, jerked in over his kennel sill, kinda his slam to the door, whenever I squeezed into my Spartan cleft from behind. Yet, what namely can a person use the nook of solitude they've so cleverly created for?

That's when I had to give free reign to my next long-standing itch, that for graphomania. I have no idea what specific label from their scientific cant they use for my particular case—expressed or manifest graphomania—yet I always felt a certain longing for clear notebooks, albums, block-notes, and suchlike stationery items. It gave me real thrill to spread them wide open and began to cover their innocent pureness with the jerks and strokes of my crinkly scribbling.

Thus, there remained only a minor drag of finding content for those ripping lines, an easy quiz for an expressed (or manifest?) graphomaniac. I simply grabbed a book about the adventures of a group of circus actors in the turbulent years of the Civil War, added a pen and a thick notebook, not finished off during the last academic year, and dragged them to my study—so to say—room…

> (…here's a queer, yet scientifically noteworthy, fact – the written exercises assigned at school for homework somehow made my graphomania fade into the woodwork…)

There, the book and notebook were placed on the desk of unvarnished plywood piece, and I started to copy the content from the first into the ruled—but otherwise untouched—pages of the latter. And I did not bother to ask myself about the purpose of such an occupation. Would it make any difference? I just enjoyed the process of doing it.

After a week or so, the process neared the middle in the second chapter, when a spell of bad weather made my study room too damp and chilly, and the printed adventure story remained un-hand-copied….

In good weather, I even had a private reading room, not of my personal creation though... The plots, unfurling behind the long sectioned shed and the lean-tos over the earth-pit cellars, were

split by narrow treads between the beds of turned soil for kitchen crops. Those beds, however, did not merge into integral landholdings of respective owners because sundry historical processes led to land swapping, as well as using it as a means of paying for goods or services obtained from the adjacent landlords. As a result, the land possessions turned into the streak of complicated patchwork. For instance, our tomato bed was located right behind the common shed and followed by Duzenko’s stretch, which separated it from our cucumber-and-sunflower bed as well as from the booth of our outhouse next to the slop pit. And our potatoes were planted past the Pilluta’s strip, at the very end of the *khutta's* garden, beneath the old sprawling Apple tree.

After our potatoes bed, there began, or rather ended, the plot belonging to the *khutta* in Kotsubinsky Street, which ran parallel to Nezhyn Street. So, the vegetable and fruit gardens, embraced by the *khuttas* of 3 adjacent streets and 1 lane, composed a vast area with vegetable beds and fruit trees of different sorts.

The Apple tree, on whose widely sprawling branches I lounged in clear summer days reading a book under the blue dome of the sky with the remote motionless cumuli, was called Antonovka Apple. Some of its branches were long enough to allow stretching out at full length over them and lightly sway until a gentle breeze would run up to you from the heat-swept expanses of the summer.

Whenever my sides felt sore from so hard a hammock, I’d climb down and go on a stealthy visit to the raspberry plot somewhere between Numbers 15 and 13. In the gardens, you might occasionally come across a short span of a fencing fragment that served a landmark splitting the possessions, but not a barrier to a sneaky raid…

From among those environs I was carried away with *The Interstellar Diaries of Jona Calm* and *The Return From a Space Mission* by Stanislaw Lem, *Khoja Nasreddin* by Vladimir Solovyov, *The Odyssey of Captain Blood* by Rafael Sabatini, among other pulp fictions for unsystematic reading by the younger generations.

But then, for no obvious reason, I suddenly decided to meet the requirements of the school curriculum and started to learn by heart the novel-poem *Eugene Onegin* by Pushkin, although at school your home assignment would be to memorize not more than the opening stanza from the poem. In breach of the modest requirement in school curriculum, after solidifying the first stanza, I went on to the following ones and murmured, day after day, to the Antonovka Apple tree about the constant alertness of the Breguet watch, and the profitable merchandise enriching scrupulous London, and the pitiful lack of a couple or two of slender female legs about all of Russia…

When the number of memorized stanzas grew over twenty, I began to lose my way in the countless threads of lines at recital them all at once until Mother helped me out. Returning from a Sunday visit to Bazaar, she mentioned meeting there Lyoudmilla Konstantinovna, a teacher of the Russian Language and Literature from our school, who asked if I would like to go to Leningrad with an excursion of schoolchildren at a modest price.

You bet I would! But where could I get the money from? Mother paid, and she also gave me an incredible sum of 10 rubles for the journey. I made a firm decision to spend that money on a miniature billiards, like the one we were playing at Children Section using steel balls from crushed bearings.

(…yet now, not as a consistent narrator, but as a layman archaeologist wrapped up in my sleeping bag in this tent surrounded by the eerie symphony of the wild forest nightlife – would I be able to unearth the root reason for the strenuous memorization of the Pushkin's masterpiece?

It seems, that only now and just from here, I would.

To begin with, the scheme "I decided and started to…" does not apply to me. Developing a use case is quite okay, especially if an accurate and reasonable one, but my way of doing things is exactly opposite. I act first, and only then start looking for a suitable reason to justify my action and give it some resemblance of logicality. That is, instead of being motivated by well-defined decisions, I do things on the spur of the moment.

But what or who is prodding me to act then?! Which are the secret springs and goads? The answer is simple: It's because of my credulous and all-too-ready submissiveness to the impact of the printed word. Yes, the stuff read by me determines my subsequent actions.

The episode, when the Soviet secret agent, Alexander Belov, forces the fascist intelligence officer Dietrich to flip thru a folder with top-confidential documentation before his eyes, so that later, in a safe house, to dictate to his helper-asset hundreds of addresses, names, and figures from his memory, becomes the hidden underlying reason for my endeavor at memorizing the rhymed lines by Alexander Pushkin.

No, I did not want to compete or check my abilities, the root stimulus is the plain fact of my reading The Novel-Gazette filled with the work by Kozhevnikov which, frankly speaking, does not deserve the name of a novel.

Or let's take another case, when, impressed by the book *The Baron in the Tree*, about an aristocrat who refused to walk upon the ground anymore, and moved to live in the trees, I mounted the heap of bricks stacked under the too thick trunk of the American Maple and, from that elevation, climbed the less impregnable part of the tree. And from there I went on getting higher and higher, to the very clouds that floated quite low on that day, almost brushing the crown.

Viewed from the upper branches, distant *khuttas* far down under the tree decreased to the size of matchboxes. Taming fear and dizziness, I observed the bird-eye view of Bazaar, and the Plant, no more hidden behind the tall wall along Professions Street, and of the Station on the other side of the Plant.

The magic power of the printed word by Italo Calvino made me compliant like melted wax, turned into a docile slave, who was alighted atop of the American Maple tree…

Of course, the secret springs slip at times – how on earth could I possibly compete with D'Artagnan and ride twenty leagues in one day running down three horses which I did not have? Keep your legs to the length of the blanket, they say.

That's why I like this sleeping bag so much – it fits any leg size…)

~ ~ ~

To Leningrad, we went thru Moscow. Besides me and Lyoudmilla Konstantinovna, School 13 was represented in the excursion group by 2 more girls from my class – Tanya and Larissa, as well as by 2 students from the parallel, 7 "A" grade – Vera Litvinova, and Tolik Sudak, the rest of the group were students from other city schools herded by a couple of their teachers.

The train arrived in Moscow in the morning, and we spent there one day which time was enough for me to make 3 major discoveries. The first one was the discovery of the existence of foreshadowing dreams. It was proved undeniably when we rode an excursion bus on our tour in the city—look to the left! look to the right!—until at some place, they asked us to leave the bus for a close look at something from anear.

Our group tagged along with the guide, I also followed straggling at some distance, when, all of a sudden, the surroundings looked so much familiar to me—both that bridge above no river, and the far-off tower of the Moscow State University, and even the locked stall on the pavement I walked by.

Someone from our group turned back and called me, "Don't lag or we will leave without you!", to which I answered, "When you turn back, I'll be the first!" And exactly that moment I felt having seen already that view in all its details and pronounced those very words because all of that was in a dream dreamed by me a week before. I felt freaked out and even stopped, but not for long – the excursion group was indeed returning to the bus.

(…in my subsequent life, time and again I had the like instances of getting back to once-seen dreams. Some of such dream recollections could precede for a split-second the actual development happening live, in real, so that I knew who and what would say a second later, and by what gesture they would accentuate their words because the going on scene was just an echo of what had been already seen by me in some earlier dream. Duration of such presaging dreams is not exceedingly long, and at times it can take years before their echoing in my wake hours.

I never discussed my discovery with anyone and much later, with a mixture of relief and disappointment, I learned that such things happen not only to me, and that folks in Scotland even have a special term for the phenomenon – "second sighting"…)

After the second revelation, we went to the All-Union Exhibition of the Achievements of National Economy, aka Veh-Deh-eN-Kha. There we were taken to the Astronautics Pavilion, with the gigantic white needle of “Vostok” spaceship put in front of its facade, one from the series by which Gagarin orbited the Earth. Inside the spacious pavilion, several excursions were wandering at once among the stands, and mock-ups and mannequins donned in red spacesuits and bulky helmets.

I did not know what the other guides were sharing to their groups, but ours ruminated things known by anyone from the times immemorial, so I kept lagging, or running ahead, and at some point sneaked off into a wide side door. Stone steps led upward following the arrowed inscription “The Optics Pavilion”. I reached the landing where the steps U-turned going up to the pavilion itself. But I didn’t follow them any farther immobilized and fascinated by the extravaganza of colorful airiness unfolded on the landing. A whopping cube of space was filled with a motionless, as if frozen, family of soap bubbles of all sizes radiating silently diverse hues of the rainbow colors. What a delight!.

My deviation from the programmed rout was noted by someone in the group and they called me from down there, “Come back! We're leaving!” After a parting look at the unreachable pavilion entrance on the upper landing, I joined the excursion.

> (…what was behind that door I do not know and the discovery itself is as follows: sometimes a single step away from the trodden rut opens new shining worlds, but, as runs a popular folk adage in the country that was the first to undertake creation of a Socialist society, “A step aside is vied as an escape attempt to be shot at to kill without warning”…)

The final, third, discovery of that day awaited me in the State Universal Shop, aka GUM, on the Red Square, where we arrived without any guide already. There, I learned that dreams do come true, you only need to be ready for their realization…

At the entrance to GUM, we were told to gather in the same spot after a half-hour and were dismissed to scatter in search for goods. From inside, GUM looked like sectioned wells of space within an ocean bulk-carrier enclosed by multi-story transitions up the hull sides.

In one of the compartments on the third floor, they were selling the billiards of my dream whose price was exactly ten rubles. O, how I did curse my gluttony! From the sum given by Mother, I had already paid for 2 ice-cream – one in the morning at the station, and the other at the V eh-Deh-eN-KHa. There remained nothing I could do but say goodbye to my dream so, to mitigate the grief, I ate one more ice-cream right in the GUM.

In the evening tired but wholly satisfied (if counting out the misfire about the billiards) we left Moscow for Leningrad…

In the city on the Neva river, we were billeted in a school on Vasilevsky Island, not far from the Zoo. At the school, we were allotted half of the gym, since the other half was occupied already by an excursion group from the Poltava city. We did not cause them any inconvenience—the

gym was pretty spacious—and only moved several black sports mats they were not using into another corner. Additionally to the mats, we were given cloth blankets getting accommodated for sleep with much more comfort than the royal court of France, when fled from the rioting Paris in *Twenty Years Later* by Alexandre Dumas where poor aristocrats were provided for the purpose with just raw straw and no linen…

For 3 meals a day, we walked up a couple of blocks to a canteen next to a humpbacked bridge above the Moika river. A very quiet place it was, with hardly any traffic at all. There, our heads paid in advance with paper coupons and the girls from the excursion group laid the food on the square tables before inviting the rest of us to come in from the sidewalk. Sometimes we had to wait because apart from the Poltava's and ours there were other groups as well – not from our gym though. In such a case we stood waiting on the nearby bridge over the narrow river with its indiscernible flow between the upright stone-lined banks.

> "***On the Moika bank,***
>
> ***we ate garbage skank"***

So ran the epigram composed by someone from our group.

> (…the rhyme, of course, is flawless, but I personally had no complaints about the food there – everything was as it always was in any canteen I dropped in along my life path…)

We were a little late for the white nights but everything else was in place – both Nevsky Avenue, and the Palace Bridge, and trotting thru the halls of the Hermitage with the immense Pompeii demolition in the picture by Karl Bryullov, and luxurious, yet small-sized, oil paintings by Dutch masters…

In St. Isaac Cathedral they launched for us the Foucault's Pendulum hanging all the way down from inside the main dome. It swung for some time swishing between the disgruntled, icon decorated, walls and then pegged down one of the sizable wooden pins lined on the polished floor.

"See?!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Cathedral guide."The Earth is turning, after all. Foucault's Pendulum has just proved this scientifically."

The revolutionary battleship Aurora denied us admittance for some reason, but we listened to the Admiralty's Cannon fired each day to mark the noon, and visited The Piskaryovskoye Cemetery with green lawns over the mass graves of people starved in the years of fascist Blockade and the pool by the dark wall for the visitors to drop their coins in.

The day when we went to Peterhof was cloudy, and crossing the Finnish Gulf we could not see the sea but only fog above the circle of yellowish water with shallow waves around the boat, like on a lake with a sandy bottom. It was boring and dank, and when I got out of the passenger hall and climbed down the short ladder to the low stern with the churned up mass of foam behind it,

the boat boy came up to tell that passengers were not allowed there. I climbed back, and he hung a chain across the ladder and started to wash the stern deck with a mop.

But the Peterhof fountains jetted pillars of surprisingly white water along the channel banks below the hillock with the palace on its top closed for restoration…

Everything in Leningrad turned out to be as beautiful as one would expect of the Cradle of Revolution. The weather got nice again, and on the first floor in the Naval Museum there stood the boat of Peter the Great, almost the size of a brigantine, and all the walls on the second floor were decorated with the paintings depicting glorious sea battles of the Russian fleet, starting with the battle in the Sinop Bay.

On the first floor of the Zoological Museum, a skeleton of whale bones towered high, while the central attraction on the second floor was the composition of life in Antarctica, behind the glazed partition. The white snowfield was painted in the back, and behind the glass there stood a few adult penguins with their beaks up in the air. They were surrounded by a kindergarten of penguin chicks of different ages to show how they change when growing.

At first, I liked them dearly – those lovely fluffy cutie pies, but soon the nagging thought that all of them were stuffed animals abated my delight. 3 dozen living birds were killed for the exposition. I did not want to look further and climbed down to the gnawed whale skeleton and out of the Museum.

In a glazed stall by the Zoological Museum, I bought a ballpoint pen—they did not sell such in Konotop yet—and two spare ampoules to it, folks said just one of them would do for a month of scribbling…

That day I was the first to finish the midday meal at the canteen and went out to the bridge over the Moika to wait for the rest of our group. Between the high walls of the river banks, a small white cutter cautiously made its way, splitting the black water into two long bumpy waves.

Then an elderly man came up to me over the bridge and warned that my pants were stained on behind. I knew about it, two days earlier I had sat down on a bench somewhere and it left a whitish splotch in the seat of my pants as if of Pine resin. It was unpleasant to be marked on behind in that way but the stain proved ungetriddable by simply rubbing-scratching so I tried just not to think of it.

He asked where I was from.

“We’ve come on an excursion. From Ukraine.”

The friendliness in his face faded. “Ukraine,” he said. “In the war years, they burned my side with the blowtorch there.”

I recollected Masha’s screech on the day they were slaughtering her, the buzz of a blue flame bursting from the nozzle of the blowtorch and the cracks in blackened skin of carcass. He grew

silent and so was I, feeling somehow guilty for coming from the place where he had been tortured. It was a relief when our group, at last, came out of the canteen.

The Poltava excursion group left two days earlier than ours. On the last evening in Leningrad, we went to the circus tent. Our seats were at the very top, under the quaking canvas roof.

It was a united performance of circus actors from the fraternal socialist countries. A pair of Mongolian acrobats synchronously jumped onto the end of a see-saw to toss up the third one, standing on the other end. The tossed man somersaulted in the air and landed on the shoulders of the strongman in the arena. The pushers launched another one and one more – three people were placed upon the man below, like after the Battle at the Kalka River.

The gymnasts from the GDR worked on four high bars put to form a square for them to fly from one bar to another. Then the Czech trainers brought out a group of monkeys who started to spin and circle on the bars left after the Germans, only much funnier.

The next day we left without visiting the canteen, probably, because of having run out of the coupons. There was a very convenient train, with no train changes, on the route thru Orsha and Konotop. Only it started off in the evening and after all the ice-cream eaten during the excursion, and paying for the ticket to the circus tent, plus the purchase of a ball pen, there remained just 20 kopecks of all the 10 rubles given by Mother.

I had a pair of piroshki for the midday meal, but at about five o'clock, when we were already sitting in the waiting room at the station, Lyoudmilla Konstantinovna noticed my despondency and asked about the reason. I confessed that I was hungry and had no money, she lent me one ruble. In a deli near the station, I bought bread and a big fish in oily brown skin and thin strings tied all around it. Clutching the paper-wrapped prey, I returned to the station with our train at the platform already.

On boarding the car, I immediately sat down at the table under the window and began to eat. Very tasty fish it was, easily crumbling but slightly drier than expected considering its oily skin. I ate one half, wrapped the rest back and put it on the third level bunk, which was not for sleeping anyway but to put your luggage there.

Some single fellow-traveler, a couple of years older than me, got seated at the opposite side of the table, took out a deck of cards and offered to play Throw-in Fool with him. I won a couple of times and, when he was once again shuffling the cards, I flashed a commonplace Kandeebynno wit for the like cases, "A dinghead's hands have no rest."

With a sidelong glance at a couple of girls from our excursion, who sat by the window across the aisle, he dryly retorted, "The less one yaks, the longer lives." I marked the look of genuine rage in his eyes and, after winning another game, refused to play on, he seemed glad to stop it too…

We arrived in Konotop in the morning after unusually heavy rain... During that night on the train, something happened to my shoes and they became too small size. I hardly forced them on, yet not completely, and my heels were partly hanging outside.

Hobbling painfully, I got off the car onto the platform and waited for our excursion to disappear into the underground passage to the Station. Then I took my shoes off and, in the socks only, went along the wet Platform 4 to the familiar breach in the fence at the very end of it.

Across the road from the breach, there stood the Railway Transportation School, I passed it by and very soon entered Bazaar. No one was ogling at me walking in the drenched socks, a disfigured shoe in each of my hands, because there were neither passers-by nor traffic around but boundless puddles everywhere.

After Bazaar the ground disappeared altogether under the even water surface. I splashed on following the streetcar track, kinda a tightrope walker along the railhead which stuck a tad bit from out the water, and on reaching Nezhyn Street I just waded ahead indiscriminately – the *khutta* was not far off already…

Later, Mother laughed, sharing with the neighbors that from both capitals I brought only a pair of shoes one centimeter too short for my feet. I hadn't ever heard or read anywhere that it's possible to grow your feet one centimeter in just one night…

On the first of September, Mother gave me one ruble to repay the debt. However, at the ceremonial line-up in the schoolyard, Lyoudmilla Konstantinovna was nowhere to be seen, and in the Teachers' Room they told me she was ill and explained how to find her apartment in the two-story block by Bazaar, so I went there.

In the apartment, she kept repeating there's no need for such haste, it even somehow seemed to me she was not very happy that I returned that debt at all. And then her father entered the room and I was surprised to see it was Konstantin Borisovich, the projectionist at Club. The world was really a small place.

> (…and were I asked now of the vividest impression from the visit to the Cultural Capital of Russia, my immediate response delayed by no hesitation would be—it is the luminous twilight in the sidewalk bounded by the stone parapet that opens to a few granite steps down to the immensely wide flow of the Neva River by the Palace Bridge when a random wave splash against the lower step sends up high spatter and the shrill screech of the girls from our excursion group standing on the first step from the stream…)

~ ~ ~

Still and all, Lenin was quite right marking the force of habit as a tremendously mighty force. Take, for example, the albums of young ladies from beau monde, where Eugene Onegin, with a reckless stroke of the quill, sketched out his author's whiskered profile on the page following the autograph by a certain Lieutenant Rzhevsky. Such an album was the must for any young lady of quality to outpour her personal feelings and amass creative scribblings of her guests and visitors.

Of course, no album of that kind had ever come near my hands, yet after a whole lot of wars, three revolutions, and radical changes in the way of life, the albums for the sentimental exercises

of sensitive girlish souls were still there because those albums had too much of a hard-die habit to simply disappear.

The struggle for life taught them to cunningly disguise—no silk bow-ties on the cover, neither creamy pages anymore—a general-purpose ruled-paper notebook in brown leatherette covers for thirty-eight kopecks, such was the common aspect of a girl's album in our class. In place of long-nosed self-portraits of aristocratic rascallions there came cutouts from the color illustrations in Ogonyok magazine, securely mounted on glue... However, poems managed to survive:

Why? O, I don't know why

A streetcar needs rails to go far or nigh

Why? O, I don't know why

Why do parrots scream and cry?

I do not know why…

A-and fancifully adorned inscriptions to relate profound maxims and winged expressions of all sorts also proved immortal:

"***The one who loves will forgive anything"***

"***Cheating kills love"***

When such an album, accidentally forgotten on a desk, fell in a guy's hands, he, having turned a couple of pages, would slap it back on the desk—some "girlish nonsense".

Yet to me, for some odd reason, those albums were interesting and I dutifully scrutinized them. As a result, I got an offensive handle of "lady-bug" among the schoolmates. Nobody ever called me that to my face, even though when our class lined-up at a PE lesson I was only the fourth in the line, and the shortest guy, Vitya Malenko, could beat me up in a wrestling match under the scornful giggling of the girls. No, I have never heard that handle, but if your sister and brother attend the same school, there is no secret for you about you that you don't know…

The school principal, Pyotr Ivanovich Bykovsky, unlike his nickname, Bykovsky the Cosmonaut, had a Herculean physique. When all the classes were lined-up in the long—from the Teachers' Room and all the way to the gym—corridor, the sizable floorboards, paint-coated in red, creaked pitifully under his measured steps alongside the ranks of students.

His mighty skull's dome with trailing locks across the wide bold, towered half-head above the tallest, graduating, class. When the drowsy look of his big eyes sent a-coasting from under his jutting jumbo eyelids over your face, your innards involuntary contracted, even though you knew

perfectly well that the mail received from the Children Room of Militia had nothing to do with you, and the principal would call another guy to get out of the ranks and face the lined-up schoolmates.

So, no surprise that when our Mistress, Albina Grigoryevna, told me to stay after classes and go to the Principal's Office, my heart sank… In that sustained state—the heart sunk and the spleen contracted—I gave the high door of his office a meek knock, and stepped in followed by partly puzzled, yet mostly farewell, glances from Kuba and Skully... Bad luck about your karma, pal, see you in some thereafter life, maybe...

In the long and narrow office room of one window at its far end, Pyotr Ivanovich sat at his desk put in profile to the door and hardly reaching up to his waist. Slight motion of his chin sent me to get seated on one of the chairs lined-up alongside the wall opposite his desk.

Uneasily, I obeyed and he picked up a thin copybook from his desk, opened it and froze in a suspensive silence boring the pages with his fixed look. Occasionally, an irate twitch wrung his thick, clear-cut, lips.

"It is your essay on Russian literature," announced he at last, "And you're writing here that in summertime the sky is not as blue, as in fall."

He consulted the copybook and read the line up, "In summer it looks as if sprinkled with dust at the edges… Hmm... Where could you have ever seen such a sky?"

I recognized the incomplete quotation from the opening sentence in my essay on free subject 'I am sitting by the window and thinking…' which was our home assignment the week before.

"In Nezhyn Street," answered I.

He began to drive it home to me, that it absolutely didn't matter – be it Nezhyn Street, or Professions Street, or Depot Street, but the sky always remained the same, both in the center and along its edges. And the blue was always blue, it stayed as blue in summer as it did in fall because blue was always blue.

At my timorous attempt to maintain a slightly different view on the sky blueness, he once again rolled out his weighty arguments and I surrendered.

"Yes, the same," said I.

"That's good. Now, we've agreed that this here sentence of yours is wrong."

And in the same unalterable manner, we proceeded to agree about the wrongness of my views. With stolid ponderosity, he shattered each and every sentence in my essay to pieces, one by one, and, after a short, forlorn, resistance, I gave in and surrendered them, one after another.

From the left bottom corner in the window, thin iron bars fanned up diagonally, the walls squeezed the high ceiling of the corridor-like office to narrow its span, the heavy desk towered over the disciplined row of the lined-up chairs, the bulging sphere of Principal's skull hovered over the desk with his crosswise hair wisps unable to hide the bald and only clinging to it like the cobweb over a still globe in the locked storeroom of School House Manager…

And I recanted, line by line, from the beginning to the essay's end, each and every word that seemed so true and right to me when writing them. Yes, Pyotr Ivanovich, you're right, I was completely wrong…

I was wrong refusing to use the template suggested by the teacher to start the essay smoothly: "Walking down the street, I heard schoolchildren arguing about Tatyana Larina from the immortal poem by Pushkin and, when already home, I got seated by the window and started to think once again about Tatyana, analyzing her social background and her love to Russian nature…"

Yes, it's a completely wrong statement that schoolchildren would rather discuss motorcycles, karate, and fishing but not Tatyana Larina's characteristic features. That's absolutely thoughtless and erroneous…

When I agreed with him on all the points, he handed me the copybook and said that I could go, yet I should think it over again.

I went out to the empty school. From the entrance door came clangs of tin pails against the iron sinks and the swish of water from the taps filling the pails—the janitors had already started washing the floors. I numbly went by those 5 taps without looking at my reflection passing thru 5 mirrors above the sinks.

From the tall brick porch, I descended with a dizzy feeling that I was not myself, and not sure of now what, and how, and whereto. Probably, Galileo had the same odd feeling right after betrayal of his discovery.

At the gate, I stopped and opened my copybook. Underneath the essay there was put a fractional mark, the denominator (content evaluation) was blank, and the divisor (grammar evaluation) – 4. Below the incomplete mark, in the same red ink, Zoya Ilyinichna turned out, in that diligently pretty handwriting of hers, four pages of her own essay that I was wrong and belied the Soviet youth. I should have recollected the winged words from the novel *How the Steel was Tempered*, as well as the heroes of Krasnodon underground resistance, and the heroes of the Red Army…

> (…from that time on, I wrote following the templates, the "berserk" blogger of XIX century Belinsky didn't become out of me, nipped in the bud.
>
> How to explain so close attention of the teaching stuff at School 13 to my incipient quill check?

Well, their generation grew up under the puttering of "black raven" vehicles' engines awaiting in the dark for another bunch of arrested "people's enemies" so they chose to preemptively react, just in case…)

~ ~ ~

Not every Konotop school could boast of a room so properly equipped for the classes in Physics as that at School 13. The blue blinds hung from the iron rings running along the string-cables fixed over the windows. They were pulled together before demonstrating educational films on this or that subject in the curriculum. But there was no screen – the films were projected onto the large square of frosted glass frame in the wall above the blackboard, like, a 2 m x 2 m TV for you.

The film projector itself was located in the back room behind the wall with that frame. Besides the aforesaid projector and round tin cans with the films, the room was furnished with lots of shelves to keep all kinds of lenses, tripods, rheostats, weighs and other untold treasures in boxes, caskets, cases to be used for staging various experiments from the textbooks on Physics and Chemistry. And on a separate stool, there also stood the gray trunk-like tape recorder "Saturn" loaded with the tape on two white reels.

The film projectionist and keeper of all the hoard was Teacher of Physics, Emil Grigoryevich Binkin, a calm handsome man of about thirty, with his eyebrows slightly twitched up his straight forehead to meet the curly short wisps of black hair, well matching the swarthy skin in his face. During the breaks, he stacked and reshuffled the things amassed in the treasury, while softly whistling all kinds of melodies, so clearly and subtly, without the slightest clam.

I had a wary attitude towards him. First, for terminating my unauthorized reading at his Physics lessons…

Normally, each day I smuggled to school a book from the Club library and at the lessons the hinged part in the desktop was flipped over to open the book placed upon the inner shelf-receptacle for a schoolbag and – full ahead, Captain Blood! Let's board the bastards!

Teachers were also happy to have so quiet a boy in the class, no trouble at all. Still, some of them made occasional attempts at breaking the equilibrium of the serene co-existence because I obviously was busy with anything but their lesson.

"Ogoltsoff! What have I just said?"

But even when engulfed by adventures in a different, Antarctic-Tropical-Martian, world, I did not cut the ties with the surrounding school nuts and bolts completely. Some tiny buoy at the edge of my consciousness kept still receiving, in a form of muffled background, the concurrent sounds in the classroom.

"Ogoltsoff!"

Aha, it's time to come up to the surface… The memory rewinds the recording of background for some half-minute back.

"You, Alla Iosifovna, have just said that 'read' is an irregular verb."

"Get seated!!"

And then at the Class Parents Meeting, she would complain to Mother, "I do see that he's busy with something miles away from the lesson it's only that I can't run him down."

Binkin had no problems with running me down. He did not demand to repeat anything, he asked questions instead, "So, what conclusion do we come here to? Ogoltsoff?"

And that's where no mechanical rewind of the previously registered background could come to the rescue. How to present conclusions from you didn't know what, especially when in sight of the dark ironic eyes above the thin rim of his glasses? He was killing with his rock-solid calmness and seemed to know exactly what page the book for bootleg reading was open at. So I had to sometimes skim the Physics textbook at home and stray-reading at school was rescheduled to fill Chemistry and Algebra classes. No, I couldn't brush Binkin off.

Only once I did come to grapples with him on a thermodynamics issue when he asked whether the temperature of the boiled potato and the soup around it was the same. I stated that, no, it's different.

"Alas, but the laws of Physics confirm it's the same in both."

"Well, yesterday, I ate soup for the midday meal and it was fine, but then I bit thru a potato in the soup and burned my tongue. As a scorched victim, I plea the Physics to revise their law-enforcement policy among unruly potatoes."

The supportive solidarity giggles from the classmates mingled with bell in its deafening uproar of a ring for the break…

That is why I was so astounded when our Class Mistress, Albina Grigoryevna, announced that on Sunday, at 11 o'clock, I should be at School 11 for the City Physics Olympiad…

It was a sunny Sunday morning when I went out of Nezhyn Street to the tramway stop by our school to wait for a streetcar because the prestigious School 11 was on the other side of the Under-Overpass, halfway between our tram terminal and the Railway Station.

The Settlement red streetcar with its round, kinda clown's nose, lamp beneath the driver cab windshield clanged up to the stop. Under the nose-lamp, there was the inventory number of the car – 33.

Fully aware that all that was a pure nonsense and stupid superstition, I, nonetheless, did not feel like letting such an opportunity pass by, to wit, when you happened to come across a double

digit, like, 22 or 77 and so forth, in a car license plate, or in the number printed on your movie ticket, or on the ticket handed to you by a streetcar conductor, you were in luck, dead sure. Just don't omit secure it by balling your fist and pronouncing the inaudible incantation, “The luck is mine. Full-stop!” Which I did.

At the Olympiad, in the group of fourteen-year-old students from the 14 city schools, I solved some of the problems about acceleration, and specific weight, and density, but not all.

To the concluding question: “Why do we first see the lightning and only then hear the thunder?”, I even draw a pencil sketch explaining the time interval between the flash and the bang.

Next week, Binkin, with an unconcealed surprise, announced that I took the first place among the eighth-graders at the city Physics Olympiad.

I did not know whether the number under the streetcar’s nose really brought luck, or the solution checkers were impressed by the clumsy lightning, but it’s nice to realize that you had beaten both a representative of the prestigious School 11 and even a guy from School 12 with its mathematical specialization... Now, get it, blockheads, from the Plant Settlement fellas!.

“The Dead Season” was on show at Club. The three of us bought tickets to ensure the show because, at times when no tickets were sold, the projectionists refused to show the film for only the check-passers. However, the audience turned out big enough, not as many as at the Indian “Zita and Guita” but no less than a quarter of the auditorium got filled.

The movie was about our secret agent in the United States starring Donatas Banionis from “No One Wanted to Die” where he got shot and killed in the end and collapsed on the desk with the unfinished note he was writing. And in America, they followed him for a long time, then caught and jailed for twenty years, but then exchanged for a CIA agent caught in the Soviet Union.

A black-and-white film, yet of the wide-screen format and Banionis had a luxurious white shirt on. You could see at glance that it was no nylon, but he wore that shirt even when cooking in the kitchen, just slightly turned the sleeves up. A cool movie, in general.

When it was over, we slowly moved towards the exit, envious that some folks could manage living interesting lives. And then Kuba clapped his muskrat-fur hat against his fist and said, “Okay! First thing in the morning to see Solovey about the secret agents school enrollment!” Skully and I burst our sides with laughter because Solovey was Precinct Militiamen at the Settlement.

Actually, no one ever referred to him as “Precinct Militiaman”, they just uttered “Solovey” and everyone got it at once. When he entered Bazaar, a muffled “Sol!..- Sol!..- Sol!..” swished over the counters and swarming caboodle. The old peasant women from Podlipnoye or Popovka buried deeper in their bags the glass jars and hot-water rubber bottles with the hooch, to keep

them out of sight. Then they turned to the legitimate part of their trade standing behind the counter with a cup of black seeds or a braid of onions—law-abiding goods.

But no horsing about Solovey's sniffing skill! And more than once, under loud curses from the trader, he poured onto the ground the bootlegged "samohrie" confiscated from her gunny sack. Once, an alky from the crowd could not stand the temptation, he fell on his four bones and lapped the hooch from the puddle. Solovey swooped at him, drove his boot a couple of times against the rummy's ribs, but the sot was in the Lap of Happiness already. Then the vehicle arrived and took him to the Sobering-up Station.

Occasionally, Solovey got his share too, and more than once they would trap him someplace in the dark and warm up with a blizzard of beating. One time they poured kerosene over him and set on fire, in another sorting out his both arms were broken with a crowbar. Well, the guys would get their times to serve, he'd recover and again – to Bazaar, in his red-topped militiaman cap, and there again, "Sol!..- Sol!..- Sol!.."

So, Kuba made a good one about becoming a secret serviceman thru Solovey…

During the winter vacations, the winners in the Physics Olympiad were taken to the city of Sumy, for the Regional Physics Olympiad. In the Konotop group, there were four boys and a girl, a ninth-grader, though she looked quite an adult girl.

In Sumy, we were accommodated for a night stay in a hotel. The number of boys coincided with the number of beds in the room. Our overseer, who was a teacher from School 12 with its Math and Physics specialization, stayed somewhere farther along the corridor, and the girl-like-an-adult in some female number.

Soon everyone gathered in our room around a two-volume paperback *Collection of Tasks and Exercises in Physics for Matriculants* brought in by the head of the group.

Gee! I had never seen such books and, until that moment, believed in earnest that school textbooks were all there was in Physics. It was a misconception. The rest of the future Einsteins from Konotop met both Collections volumes as their good acquaintances and even bosom friends. They began to actively discuss in which of their sections there were especially complex tasks and in which not that much so.

The teacher offered to work out some of the tasks, just for a knock-up. Everyone immediately fell to scribbling formulas and explaining them to each other. I was "the sixth odd" at their laborious party. Those exercises advanced far beyond the problems which Binkin solved with us in the class blackboard.

Then we went out to the city to have a meal at a canteen. On the way back, I lagged to furtively admire the gait of the girl-like-an-adult. The green coat fitted her wide figure tightly and every

step produced oblique folds in the coat's fabric on her back. Flick to the right, flick to the left. Hither-thither. Flick-flick.

In fact, besides the long coat, high boots, and a knitted hat, there was nothing to look at but those rhythmic folds on her back... well, using the cant from the Onegin's epoch, they drove me crazy. Though, seemingly, a fiddle-faddle, those folds were not a trifle for the connoisseur and collector of the like gems. Some books were reread for more than once just because I knew there were a couple of lines "about it". A couple of miserly lines, but they contained a specific detail, which I would put into my secret casket for later use.

For instance, in a sci-fi story by Harry Harrison about time machine, a film-shooting crew jumped over into the year of one thousand, to make an action movie. Their male star had an accident there, and they had to replace him with an available local Viking.

Now, the film director instructs that newly baked Schwarzenegger about his action in the next scene: "You rush into a bedroom in the castle you've just seized. You see a half-awake beauty and throw away your weapon. Sit down on the bed next to her and slowly move her brassiere strap to fall from her shoulder. Cut! The scene is done. Everything else is left to the imagination of film-goers, where the sky's the limit, and you can safely bet your bottom dollar on it."

A-ha! That's the long-awaited-for detail! The brassiere strap sliding slowly from the soft smooth round shoulder… No flat and vague "kiss on the sugar-sweet lips" for you.

And that same night, with the blanket pulled over my head and the eyes closed tightly, I burst into a half-asleep beauty's bedroom. But, of course, without any stupid cameras and highlights, I am not a movie Viking but a real-life one, and it's the real Middle Ages we are having around here. I throw away my shield and sword and flick her brassier strap off.

At first, she resists but, on taking a more attentive look at the regular features of my face, she willingly spreads over the bed. I roll on top of her body… A hot wave floods the lower part of my belly… My cock twitches in the boner… My eyes are shut… And I… What?!!.

I do not know what comes next. So, it's time to take a rest before another dive into the coveted casket for some other secret detail to start building up a new situation about it and eventually bring about the painfully sweet state of cursed ignorance.

> (…Leo Tolstoy fervently advocated against male masturbation.
>
> Any seasoned saint starts their career in a form of unscrupulous sinner, otherwise, they would miss the stage of self-denying in their spiritual growth which is just null and void if the pains of disentangling from the ties to brute creation level were omitted.
>
> I cannot make my mind precisely if my erection orgies might be classified as a commonplace masturbation. On the one hand, no cock chafing was applied thru the noose-like palm grip, and I had never cum. But on the other hand, what if that was just a contactless foreplay, kinda introductory knock up? What if not for presence of my

brother, sniffling in peaceful innocence next to me on the folding couch-bed, I'd go astray, swap my wallowing in erotic speculations and no-touch hardon for the conventional friction toil and join the ranks of 95 percent of all male mankind with Leo Tolstoy and choryphaei of Italian cinematography in the head of the procession?.)

Once in the schoolyard, Kuba asked keenly, "Did you know, that wanking causes hair-growth on your palms?"

Skully and I simultaneously looked in our hands, to the Kuba's happy guffaw. I knew that my palms were sinless, but I looked all the same, out of pure instinct... So, as it turns out, those folds, flicking this way and that way in front of me, were not a negligible trifle. Maybe at some future session of my contactless masturbation, the green coat would open and a tender voice call softly, "Are you also cold? Come closer. Let's warm each other…" And I… What?!.

In the evening the mentor brought the same volumes again and persistently suggested to pay attention to exercises of such and such numbers. The winners gave them short shrift, and I only looked silently over their shoulders keeping the countenance of an inveterate problem cracker…

The Regional Olympiad took place at some institute for higher education. In the auditorium for eighth-graders, each competitor was given a thin copybook stamped on every other page. In the first one, you had to write your name and where you were from. The following two were for rewriting the problems from the blackboard, six of them, all in all. Gee! Three of the problems turned the very same which our mentor was solving the previous night in the hotel room with the wise guys. Yet, the morning had not made me any wiser, the problems seemed as unapproachable as they were the night before.

It was boring to sit idly there, yet to get up and leave at once, disrupting the tense silence of concentrated brain work that reigned around, seemed not too polite. So I opened the last page in the copybook and started a pencil sketch of a pirate. His face I could imagine vividly enough, both the broad mustache and the plum-like eyes staring from under the turban on his head in a half-turn over his shoulder. Yet, on the paper, everything went wrong. Even the blunderbuss pistol, like by those robbers in "The Snow Queen", did not better the picture.

Hmm… Not only I did not live up to be a new Sir Isaac Newton, but also turned out a too lousy painter for a Repin... I recollected Father's ass that pulled him out of the Party Studies School, in my case, it was walking out on foot. I took the copybook to the inspectors' desk and left…

Of course, the fiasco in such essential fields as Physics and Painting dealt me a moral shock. To deaden the stingy feeling of defeat or, in a nutshell, to mitigate the grief, I bought a pack of cigarettes with filters. "Orbit" it was, for thirty kopecks. However, the orbital test was delayed until my return to Konotop, where I waited two more days before a suitable moment to retire with the tantalizing pack to the outhouse in the snow-clad garden.

One drag… Another… A fit of coughing... Transparent, greenish bagels floated before the eyes. Nausea. All the symptoms described by Mark Twain in Tom Sawyer's case. O, yes, respect and

trust to the classic would spare throwing a barely started pack of “Orbit” thru the dark hole in the outhouse floor…

~ ~ ~

Opposite Railway Station Square, across the streetcar track and the asphalt road, there was the park named after Lunacharsky, the first Soviet Minister of Education, a wide area with alleys of tall trees connected by low curtains of trimmed bushes.

On entering the park, you were met by a white monument to Lenin who stood on its tall gray pedestal in a pensive deliberation of the Railway Station. Clutching the jacket lapel with his left hand, he lowered his right one at full arm’s length, and slightly withdrew it back in a both political and poetic attitude, like a harvester driver petting with his palm the ears of wheat: got ready to be cut down?.

Thru the trees lined-up behind the monument, there peeped the massive cube of the three-storied Culture Palace also named after Lunacharsky, but in the Konotop parlance shortened to just ‘Loony’ (not Minister of Education, of course, but the Culture Palace) and because of the name duplication you had at times to ask for clarification: Loony Park or Loony Palace?.

The building bore no architectural excesses—even walls, square windows, rectangular entrance. Contrary to the outside appearance, Loony had four floors, the hidden one, comprising the auditorium for film shows, sat deep in the basement. However, since the same films were run at Club just one week later and for free, thanks to check-passes from the Club Director, Loony remained out the scope of our interests.

The excitement about the Loony Culture Palace was breaking out in the second half of the academic year, when there started the season of games at Club of Jolly and Resourceful, aka CJR, in the competition between city school teams. That's when everyone wanted to get on the second floor of Loony, into the auditorium filled with blue-velvet-covered seats lined in too close rows over the smooth parquet floor.

They didn’t sell tickets to CJR games and to get there I had to beg it from our School Pioneer Leader, and Volodya Gourevitch would answer that the ticket distribution was controlled by the City Komsomol Committee, and the quota they allotted for School 13 was way too wee, which got further decimated by his senior colleagues in the Teachers’ Room ripping off their lion’s share and that was not his fault, right? Those tickets were always blank, marking neither seats nor rows, so it was only wise to come upfront and occupy a seat so as not to stand all the game in the narrow side passages or perch on the marble window sill at the back of the hall, leaning to the darkness behind the chilly panes, for that was winter, after all…

In winter the PE classes were held outside. The teacher, Lyubov Ivanovna, unlocked the dark “cell” next to the door of the consecutive Pioneer Room and School Library. Each student grabbed a pair of skis and poles leaned against the blind walls in the bulbless “cell”, and went to

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street to run under the poplars along the streetcar track. Lyubov Ivanovna checked her big round stopwatch and announced the results. Next to her stood a pair of girls who on that particular day could not, for some reason, run and kept the class register for Lyubov Ivanovna to enter her evaluation of the class sporting achievements... Some interesting equality of sexes, eh? The girls could run or not run at their wish, but if you're a male-student Lyubov Ivanovna would never ask how you feel about running and simply commanded: get ready! start! Run, boy, run!

The fastener-straps on the lousy school skis were much too hard, they didn't hold a candle to the fixtures made by Father from thick rubber bands in the old days back at Object. But I never brought my skis to school for PE lessons saving them for extra-curriculum use…

That day after the midday meal we, the inseparable trinity of boy-friends, skied to the hill behind the Grove in the vicinity of Podlipnoye. The hill was quite steep, but we had glided no more than a couple of times before two slobs came from the village with the demand for our skis. One of them even tried to punch Kuba, but he ducked and glided down out of reach. Skully and I followed, but not in the steepest place like our friend.

Those two blockheads pursued running on foot and, at the edge of the Grove, the faster runner stepped on the end of my ski. I fell. When I got up, I saw that Skully had already removed his skis, bunched them onto the shoulder of his workman padded jacket and ran dodging between the dark trunks in the winter Grove. The picture got screened by a head in a black-fur hat with loosened flaps. The fur of the visor covered his eyes and only the thick-lipped smirk was visible. The portrait sharply splotched away as I took it on the nose and collapsed by a tree.

"Got it? Take off the skis, bitch!"

His partner ran up in a moment. Being either less drunk or more sensitive—the snow around was spattered with sizable drops of blood trickling from my nose—he just told me to get lost, and led his buddy away back to the village.

Full of sullen apathy, I skied thru the Grove plugging my nose with lumps of snow replacing those as they got red one after another. On the side street by the school, Kuba was waiting for me. He looked into my face and told to better wash it under a tap, he also said that Volodya Gourevitch wanted to see us in the tenth-grade classroom for some urgent talk.

In the schoolyard, I took off my skis and climbed up the porch to the empty school building, by five o'clock the janitors usually left it having done their job. The school remained empty with only the watchman in, and sometimes a group of pioneers preparing a collective recital by accompaniment of the button-accordion of the School Pioneer Leader.

The mirror above a sink showed that the blood was oozing no more and that it was not mine but some stranger's face with the nose two times thicker than normal and the tooth-brush mustache painted under it with brown makeup. The gore-stained chin was no cleaner. I washed until Kuba said it wouldn't get any better, then I wiped my face with a handkerchief. The pulse throbbed dully within the puffed nose.

In the appointed classroom, there was Volodya Gourevitch all alone. Delicately keeping his glances off my face, so as not to accidentally graze my huge nose, he made a speech about the crying shame that our school each year got kicked out from CJR in the initial pool of the game. And the disgrace was caused by our over-reliance on the graduation classes. We had to break that vicious practice. We had to find new forces. New blood was what we needed.

Alarmed, I looked back at Kuba. He shrugged his shoulders, and Volodya Gourevitch declared that I was the ready Captain for the School 13 CJR team. The throb of pulsation became more distinct and moved from inside the nose into the nape, where I felt it after that publication of the anonymous story signed by my name in *The Pioneer* magazine…

A month later the CJR team of School 13, quite unexpectedly, won their first game. In the initial contest of the game, exchange of greetings, Kuba and I came on stage in real tails and bicorns borrowed from auntie Tanya's Costume Room at Club. Napoleon (acted by me) in his swell attitude—the right hand in his tails breast, the left one balled and pressed to the back above the buttocks—recited the famous line:

"…Moscow! This sound alone holds volumes for a Russian heart!"

Then, abruptly shedding off the poetic enchantment, I turned to Marshal Murat and ordered, "Burn Moscow down!"

Kuba sniffed up his nose and replied, "No problem, Sire! As you wish!"

The audience rocked with laughter and the rest of our team appeared on stage in casual clothes and bicorns made of Whatman paper under a merry air by the button-accordion from behind the scenes. We acted a couple of jokes more, won the contest and, eventually, the whole game.

In that same merry-go-happy, fine and dandy, way, we reached the final held in May, because everyone had learned already that we were a strong team, and if not to laugh at our jokes then at whose else? At every game in the contest of Captains, I acted some kind of Napoleonic postures adding a Mussolini-like pull to my chin, right to left and up, to provoke the willing guffaw from audience.

The only thing I did not like was that the script for our victorious start-up was copied from TV. We simply aped the performance of a CJR team who played on Central TV a few years before. Volodya Gourevitch met my scruples by loud laughter and proclamation about winners exempt from condemnation. Yet, all the same, it was like dubbing your name under the stuff by another guy.

So, the concluding seconds in the final game were running out and Jury Chairman, aptly pumping up suspension, read on his mike, "…And the season's winner... becomes the CJR team of School … 13!"

Still not believing in what has been just announced, I, together with the whole hall, shouted, "A-a-a!" and turned to our team to see that all of them were galloping towards me – both Kuba, and

Skully, and Sasha Uniat from the ninth grade, and Sasha Rodionenko from ours, and everyone else roaring “A-a-a!” on the run.

And suddenly, instead of them, white light in between blue curtains flew at me. I did not immediately realize that they were the fluorescent lamps above the stage, a-swaying to me and back. Our team was tossing me in the air…

The following year the victory again was ours, yet no Captain tossing performed…

Already in the tenth grade, before the graduation, we reached the finals, yet lost to the prestigious School 11. At that concluding game, we once again re-played performance of a CJR team on Central Television from the current year. The game on TV still was too fresh in the memory of many, and we were accused of brazen plagiarism...

However, all of that was still in the lap of the future, when I was listening to the fiery speech about the change of school generations, and the throbbing pulsation moved from my nose to the back of my head. With amazement, I thought of fancy swerves in tides of fate that could uplift you, in just a single day span, from a trampled skier to Captain, dammit! So, there's no grounds for grumbling about monotony in the course of events I was destined to undergo. It’s only that from that day, my flawlessly Roman nose remained a bit turned to the right…

~ ~ ~

Destiny, aka fate, aka fortune, ain't in favor of a beeline course but prefer some wiggly sine curves, like a drunk alky, and, to make it funnier, swings up and down …crest—trough… peak—pothole.

One day ago, for example, Volodya Gourevitch, laughing his loud merry laugh, handed me a card posted on School 13 in my name. It was sent by the ninth-grader girl-like-adult who participated in the Regional Physics Olympiad and now sent her congrats on our victory at CJR concluding with a screwed-in quotation from Mayakovsky:

“***Shine everywhere, always shine!..”***

Something kept me from answering the card, either the heinously joyful School Pioneer Leader’s laughter or my being ashamed at her unawareness that more than once I had unbuttoned her green coat under my blanket on the folding couch-bed shared with my younger brother.

And just a couple of days later I went to Peace Square because my sister told that by that building where in summer they sold kvass from the two-wheeled yellow barrel-trailer, they put a booth to refill ballpoint pen ampoules for just 10 kopecks. Such ampoules, for both short and long ball pens, you could buy in bookshops but at the double price—for 20 and 22 kopecks apiece.

Riding a streetcar on my way back, I stood by the large poster fixed behind the glass wall in the driver’s cab, as big as a spread-out newspaper only the title much longer: “Rules For Streetcar

Usage in the City of Konotop of Sumy Region”. As if other cities had different rules, eh? Or if anyone but me had ever read the articles in those Rules… The rules on how to correctly ride a streetcar… on paying 3 kopecks for a ticket… and who you’re supposed to cede your seat to… And the concluding article about the measures of administrative penalties up to the three-ruble fine if being caught without a ticket. A good quality paper in that poster, so glossy and obviously thicker than the common newsprint…

The conductors with their puffy bags on gunny straps had since long disappeared from the streetcars. And the tickets were replaced with paper coupons sold by drivers thru a small hole in the cabin door. The stupidly located hole made you bow way too low when buying coupons, yet for a driver seated in the cab, the height was comfortable enough.

And in the streetcar walls, between the windows, they fixed small boxes with lever-handles. You insert your coupon in the slot of a box, pull the lever—click!—your slip's marred by punched holes which, if closely scrutinized, made up the pattern of digits. Occasionally, a couple of inspectors boarded the streetcar at the stops asking the passengers to deliver their coupons and checked those digits. Because in Tramway Depot, they periodically changed the pattern in the levered boxes: ain’t it smart?

Yet, any smartness could be outsmarted and some bilkers kept by them a handful of used coupons to travel for free, and when addressed by the inspector they would present a whole bunch of paper trash angled from their pocket, “How could I know which one is from this streetcar? Look yourself for the right one…” At times some too stubborn ass of an inspector might start to kick the dust up because after a month of riding in the pocket many a coupon got travel-fretted. However, they would sooner give up and move along to the next passenger…

So, under those Rules, I stood, although there were vacant seats, it’s only that in winter standing seemed warmer than sitting.

Some familiar guy boarded at the stop in Zelenchuk Area. Although I didn’t know him by his name, he was from the graduating class at our school, and a couple of times I saw him in Club too. Well, so he moved near. Hey. Hey. How’s all? So-so. And we went on standing silently.

Then I saw the jerk started clamping me as if I was a girl. On the right, there's the window with the handrail across it and the driver cab behind me, with those darn Rules above another handrail. Now, the clown grabbed those 2 handrails and pressed me into the corner.

“Piss off! Stop horsing!” says I, but he only giggled and squinted his stupid eyes, yet didn’t let me go. Such a shame. I looked at the passengers. They were not many, like, about a dozen and everybody, as if mimicking each other, was looking out of the windows intently so, like, on an excursion to a famous city, like, something could be seen thru the ice-coated panes.

To put it short, I barely managed to wriggle out of his grip and stood on the steps by the cab door. There, I had to put my clothes in order because of both the jacket and the sweater, well, everything up to the naked skin, got jerked up. Some stupid asshole, if so was your bent, go and

enroll the Greek-Roman wrestling group at the Club Gym and rub against your partners on the mats. But what a humiliation for the big-time CJR Captain getting into a such sinusoidal flop!.

And the next breathtaking crest rolled up end April at the All-Union military-patriotic game Zarnitsa, aka "Heat-Lightning". Nominally, the game was for pioneer organizations but still involved all the senior classes. And I was appointed Commander of the United Formation at School 13!

No paper shoulder straps, no division into "blues" and "greens", and everyone should have by themselves a knapsack with the field ammunition: a bowl and spoon, a needle and thread. After the line-up in the schoolyard where a PE teacher, Ivan Ivanovich, checked a pair of knapsacks for the presence of the told items, we went along Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street, past Bazaar and turned into Budyonny Street. There we passed the Plant Park and went down to the Swamp, aka Grove. Thick fog was hiding progress of the column on march.

We stopped at the Grove and the PE teachers—Ivan Ivanovich and Lyubov Ivanovna—opened a sealed envelope with the directions for our further route and mission. The column proceeded to the bridge in the high railway embankment. Besides the main tracks, there was a sideway forking-off from under the bridge to the Meat-Packing Plant, we followed that lone track and outflanked the Grove from the left.

The fog was thinning and thru its rising wisps, there peeped fragments of a bumpy field. Ivan Ivanovich roared "To attack!" and we ran across the field shouting "Hurray!" I ran amid the disordered crowd and didn't feel my body, which, like, dissolved in the general stampede and of all my senses there remained only the sight relaying sketchy pictures of torn fog locks over bumps and tussocks jumping before and past me…

Then we stopped not far from Podlipnoye in the field with occasional mighty-trunk Elms. The fog cleared up completely, and the day became glad and sunny. A real army field-kitchen arrived from the village and we were fed with hot soup. Then after a short-cut march thru the Grove, we returned to our schoolyard and lined up again. As the commander, I stood to face the ranks, ranging from the sixth to the tenth-graders, and some unknown cameraman shot us, buzzing his hand camera.

The following Monday Volodya Sherudillo mockingly (but very funny) acted me facing the ranks of my schoolmates, a slouch-shouldered weakling with a stoop but, whenever the camera turns my way, I'm bravely thrusting my chest out and stretching at attention almost to tiptoes.

> (…at times I wonder if not for the daily fetching water from the pump to our *khutta,* might I have still become for at least an inch taller than the fourth in the line of boys when our class fell in at PE classes?..)

That spring I had a dream of a long journey and by no other means if not a raft. Most likely, I was impressed by the Tour Heyerdahl's *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*. The dream was shared with Kuba and Skully, and they approved it, yeah, that would be cool, they said. And we even began to discuss the details of its realization. If, say, the raft was built on the Seim river then, carried by

its flow, we would reach the river of Desna and farther downstream to the mighty Dnieper, that flowed to the Black Sea. And the journey should be completed before August when Kuba had to leave for entrance examinations to the Odessa Sea School and Skully to some Mining Technical College in Donetsk.

The dream lasted for two weeks, and then it began to wither. Problems of growing magnitude cropped up in the way of bringing it to life. Well, suppose we'd made a deal with the watchman in the Pine forest on the Seim river. Then how to move a heavy log from the forest to the river? Dragging it for half-kilometer? But when constructing a raft, you needed more than a log or two. Eventually, I ran into a thought which shattered the dream irreparably, into fine useless shreds. Because I remembered that on the Dnieper, following the Lenin's GOERLO plan, they had built several hydro-electric power stations whose dams across the river put raft navigation out of question. Dismantle the raft and drag it, log by log, to bypass each dam? Damn!. I did not tell my friends about the incompatibility of the advanced electrification with our beautiful dream and simply stopped discussing it with them…

Volodya Gourevitch made another fiery speech and declared it was time to annul the hegemony of School 11 at the city Ballroom Dancing Competitions. At the first training of the group of ballroom dances, there were formed five pairs of willing dancers from both eighth grades. Volodya Gourevitch demonstrated us waltzing in the ballroom style, after which he played his button-accordion for us to dance.

Skully dropped out at once without any explanation except for he just did not want to. Kuba and I lasted longer, but very soon the group of prospective hegemony-busters disintegrated. And really what's the point in going on, if my partner, Natasha Grigorenko, after finishing the eighth grade was moving to School 12 whose Math and Physics specialization boosted the chances of its students for entering some Institute on graduating?.

End May, Kuba and I had a bike ride to the Bay Beach on the Seim river to open the swimming season. It turned out that twelve kilometers of riding a bike by the even path alongside the railway embankment, was not an overly exhausting exercise…

On the beach, there was not a single soul except for us and our bikes dropped on the sand. And the water was still too chilly, but we took a swim all the same. Then from the nearby bushes there droned the buzzing swarms of mosquitoes who hungrily stung us from all the sides and very badly too. Probably, we had just fallen out of the habit during the winter. To get rid of the blood-suckers, we tried burying ourselves in the sand, but the sand was also too cold and didn't protect from the bites of those flying cannibals. Our crazy cries echoed in the empty beach, and then we had another swim and rode back to Konotop. We didn't know yet that life, actually, is a series of losses, but felt that from that beach our ways parted…

~ ~ ~

Yes, that year School 13 was hegemonic in everything except for the ballroom dancing. We even won the city competition at the concluding stage of the All-Union Game 'Zarnitsa'.

On a Sunday, the teams from city schools, six people each, under the supervision of their PE teachers, went on a one day hike to the forest near the Seim. There were all sorts of competitions: for the transportation of an "injured" without a stretcher, for putting up a two-man tent, for skillful bandaging…

My part in the competitions was measuring distances by eye. The umpire asked how many meters were to the tree over there, and then silently recorded the participants' estimations. I was following changes in his facial expression.

Someone said the distance was 20 meters. The umpire lifted his right eyebrow, the guess seemed an overshoot. To the estimation in 14 meters, the umpire's mouth dropped its left corner—not enough. So I called out the average—17 meters. After everyone got thru their attempts, the umpire checked his records and announced that the most accurate was my guess – I didn't need a tape-meter…

However, everything was to be decided in the concluding contest of boiling water on the fire in a ten-liter tin bucket. No favoritism would help out, neither reading of facial expressions.

The start given, the matches stroke matchboxes by the brushwood mounds readied for bonfires. Dense white smoke gave way to crackling flames—it's time to hang the bucket over the fire and feed the firewood to it; the drier, the better.

The red tongues of fire fluttered unsteadily under the bucket, licking its tin, painting it black with soot. The bastard of a wind! So much of flames driven away from under the bucket... The team of School 12, trying to control the situation, held a blanket in their hands, sort of a screen to block the wind, prevent its playing with the fire. But we? Our PE teacher Ivan Ivanovich, a wartime soldier and an experienced fisherman, scornfully waved aside their smartness. That's all bullshit! Get more brushwood, the drier and smaller, the better. Put it over that side!

No textbook presented me with a clearer and more memorable idea of water-boiling stages. Heating; light steam over the water; formation of tiny bubbles on the vessel walls; the bubbles float up forming agitated foam and, at last, the water in the bucket starts to roll, jump and splash, it gushes the white steam up.

The umpire clicks his stopwatch. Hooray! We are the first!. And School 12 still about their bucket ogling the bubbles on the tin walls…

The competition over, the teams boarded the buses. Except for those who wished to spend the night in two large tents, and in the morning the bus would come to take them back to Konotop…

At twilight, I left the glade with the tents and went deeper into the forest. In general, it was the same as at the Object, only more deciduous than coniferous. Casting an appraising look around, I took a leak. Suddenly, some part of the forest next to me came into motion separating from the picture of stillness in the late evening woods. What's happening?

The eye, perplexed at the unaccustomed sight reported nothing to the stunned mind until the thing little by little assumed a certain form and consistency… Wow! That's a moose! What a whopper! And it had been standing so nigh… Looking after the giant disappearing among the trees, I thought it was not in vain that I did stay for the night.

At night I regretted my staying there. Because of inexperience and unbridled individualism, I had lain down by the canvas wall of the tent, becoming the last in the line of guys preparing for the night. The night chillness woke me up an hour later and forced to press my back against the last but one guy in our sleeping group to feel at least a drop of warmth.

In the small hours, chilled down to the point of freezing, I got out of the tent when the night darkness hardly started to turn gray. The ashes of the fire next to the tents were dead, but a couple of youths still sat near it—a girl and a boy. Probably, being foolish like me, they had tried sleeping at the edges and not in the midst of the group in their tent…

No bus came after us. Instead, a "goat"-Willys with a canvas top drove into the glade, and we were told there had happened some pickle. The collapsed tents and four girls filled all the room there was in the vehicle, and the rest had to go to the city on foot, carrying the 2 tent stocks that also needed transportation to the House of Pioneers, yet did not fit into the "goat".

It turned out that twelve kilometers on foot were a damn long distance, especially when dragging along a wooden tent stock even if not too heavy.

The guys from School 12 soon disappeared from view together with their stock, and we lagged diminishing in numbers because some people went ahead and we never caught up with them, neither saw them that day.

When we reached a streetcar stop in the city outskirts there remained only three of us: I, my classmate Sasha Skosar, and the smooth stock of pinewood coated with green paint.

> (…Oboy! We got bone-tired. I remember that stunned by fatigue we were not up to chewing ham when reached the streetcar stop nearby the Tram Depot, which memory leaves me indifferent. Perhaps, any kind of sentiment got dulled by multiple repetitions of that same state in my following life. However, the picture of a moose dissolving in the twilight among the trees, I can vividly see even now and it brings a little smile to my lips – hey, Mr. Whopper, pass my best to Bambi!..)

~ ~ ~

In spring Father switched his workplace. He left his job of a locksmith at Car Repair Shop Floor of the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant and moved over to Shop Floor 19 at the Konotop Electro-Mechanical Plant, aka KEMZ, aka the "Red Metallurgist" Plant, to embrace the same position there.

The salary of workers at KEMZ was a trifle higher. The trifle's exact size though I didn't know, such matters never interested me because it's Father and Mother who were in charge of getting

money, after all. I had cares of my own being up to my chin in CJR, and Club, and all sorts of Groups, not to mention the books non-stop exchanged at the library. Well, kerosene and water fetching were also my responsibility, but if they needed something from the Nezhyn Store, let them send Natasha or Sasha…

Besides his salary, Father earned some side money by repairing TV sets considered hopeless cases even by the specialists at the TV Repair Atelier. About once a month, coming from work, he would collect his pot-bellied satchel of green leatherette with his multimeter tester, soldering iron, some spare vacuum-tubes, and other necessary things before leaving till late at night. Then he'd come back, sozzled pleasantly, and hand Mother a crushed three rubles of earnings. To parry her loud rhetoric disparaging his shameful alcoholic propensity, he reiterated one and the same, unbeatable clue, "Was my drink on you?" Probably, Mother's eagerness to upgrade his moral standards took roots in her suspicion of 2 more rubles stashed away by Father, I don't know, I've never been keen on monetary matters…

Sometimes, the procedure lasted for two evenings. If so, on the first one, Father came back home sober with neither money nor his satchel left at the client's *khutta* until resolving the complicated case. The most critical ones were delivered to our *khutta*. Father put the dead box on the desk under the only window in the room, where he freed it of its case transferred then out of way onto the wardrobe, so that the desktop held now just the box's entrails—the electronic tube within the skeleton of aluminum panels with the thick growth of divers radio vacuum-tubes. He would turn it over and over, checking from all sides, muttering, "Well, so what's that that you want then? Eh, sweetheart?"

In the dead of night, I would be waked by sharp hissing—Father, in the niggardly light from the desk lamp, had brought bouncing white stripes to flick across the tube screen. "So, that's why you couldn't shoot, girlie! Not loaded you were!"

Then, for a couple of days, we watched the repaired TV because its screen was wider than that of ours until the owner came to take back home the box he'd almost crossed out from his life. So, it's not in vain that Father made the filings of those *The Radio* magazines…

Mother also wanted to change her job but couldn't find any. It was Father who helped her to get a job at KEMZ. He repaired the TV of Personnel Manager there, and when asked about the charge, Father answered he did not want money, let his wife be given a job at the plant. Personnel Manager replied, "No problem, bring her."

At first, Mother could not believe it, because six months before that same Personal Manager flatly turned her down saying there were no prospects of any jobs there.

When the parents came together, Personal Manager suggested Mother apply for a presser at Pressing Shop Floor. Though they worked in shifts there, the salary depended on the production output, and no one took home less than a hundred rubles. While Mother went to his secretary to fill the application form, Personal Manager laughed and told Father that he remembered her, but the previous time he thought she was pregnant. Women in a family way were not supposed to be

given a job, after a month of working they'd get a year of paid maternity leave. Personal Manager wouldn't be petted for admitting the pregnant but, as it turned out, so was her bodily structure.

That way Mother became a presser at KEMZ. Her job there was filling all kinds of molds with special powders for melting by the heating press to transform them into this or that spare part of plastic. She worked two shifts—a week from eight to five, the following one from five to half to twelve, because of the shortened break for meal.

In summer the press radiated infernal heat, and the molds were awfully heavy all year round, replacing them on the press was a strenuous job. Late at night, the Konotop streetcars ran all too rarely, it took long waits to get from KEMZ to the Under-Overpass after the evening shift. But worse of all was pressing things of the glass wool. The fine glass dust made its way thru the protective robe giving unbearable itch all over the body and even the after-shift shower did not really help.

Yet, as a silver lining to that cloud, both in our *khutta* and in the yard there appeared a whole bunch of different boxes and thingamabobs made of plastic of different colors because Mother brought home the defectively pressed spare parts or those dented at pulling out from their molds. So what if that one had a chink in the corner? Look, what a classy modern ashtray it makes!. Even Zhoolka got a nice ribbed basin for drinking water... All that because "The Red Metallurgist" production was supposed for all kinds of units and safety systems in the mining industry.

"Mom," asked I, seemingly under the impression from some of the nihilist-authors, "What's the meaning in your life? Why do you live at all?"

"Why?" answered Mother, "To see how you grow up and become happy."

And I shut up because at times I had brains enough not to be too clever…

~ ~ ~

The changes were taking place not only in our part of the *khutta*. One of the grannies-sisters from the Duzenko's part returned to her village, and the other moved to her daughter's, somewhere in the five-story blocks of the Zelenchuk neighborhood, so that they could rent her *khutta*. A single mother, Anna Sayenko, together with her daughter Valentina moved in as the lodgers.

Valentina was a year older than me but didn't look that because of being short, red-haired, and skinny. Her nose was pretty long though. In the evenings, she came out to play cards with the 3 of us, the younger and me, on the wide bench under the window overlooking the 2 stairs of their porch way. A very comfortable bench it was, you could safely lean your back against the adobe-plastered wall of the *khutta* coated with ancient whitewash which left no traces.

During the game, taking advantage of the gathering twilight, I touched Valentina's shoulder with mine. So soft it was… And everything began to swim… She mostly withdrew, but sometimes

not immediately which made my pulse throb quicker, louder, and hotter. But then she stopped coming out for the game. Probably, because of my pressurizing her shoulder too tight…

From the Duzenko's son-in-law, Father bought the smaller of the 2 sections left by the geezer in the common shed. It was the lean-to on the left, next to the Turkov's fence. Once upon a time, they kept a pig there and, to make it warmer, plastered its outside walls with cob.

Father replaced the Ruberoid roofing felt with a tin roof, though not of new tin, of course. Watching how dexterously he knocked his mallet interlocking the panels of tin, I was amazed at how many skills he had, and also tools for each particular job. Take those tin-cutting scissors, for example, nothing of the kind you could find at stores. No wonder that Skully, whenever in need of a tool, popped up in our *khutta*, "Uncle Kolya, gimme the hand-drill." "Uncle Kolya, may I borrow a needle file for a while?"

In the wall opposite the entrance to the acquired section, Father inserted a hinged glazed frame like that in the veranda. The electric wiring was run from our part in the shed, which was the section next to it.

Uncle Tolik applied at his workplace for waste crates, in which chopper spare parts were brought to the RepBase. Those crates were remodeled into the flooring shields. Thus, the lean-to became Father's workshop equipped with a workbench and vice and everything needed. And the space by the wall, where the sloped roof did not allow standing at your full height, became the stable for Uncle Tolik's "Jawa".

With the motorbike moved from our old section in the shed, it grew roomier, even though the remaining crate planks were stacked under its gable-roof.

As usual in summertime, the leaves of the door between the kitchen and the room were taken out of the *khutta* because shutting the door in hot season left there no air for breathing, and those leaves were placed upon the planks beneath the shed roof.

A heap of insignificant, unnecessary details, eh? Yet, all those moves had a tremendous effect because when giving it a proper thought, you'll find a way for cardinal improvements... And now, with a mattress placed upon the door leaves, the shed section became my summer dacha.

The bed-upon-the-door was about at the same level as the upper sleeping bunk in a train car compartment, yet wider. On the nearby wall, Father fixed a sliding lamp with a tin shade, and I could read at night as long as I chose. Besides, I equipped my dacha with a small radio receiver "Meridian" presented to Father by a customer delighted by the resurrection of his TV. The generous gift, of course, was not working, yet in a couple of weeks, Father found the necessary spare parts and my place became the second to none. You could read whenever you wanted and, for a change, listen to the radio. And, most importantly, no one around to start carping, "When will you turn off this light already?!" or, "Enough of that hurdy-gurdy!"

So, in that elevated position, all alone, was lying I next to the cone of the light shed over the pages in an open book till midnight and past it in the serenity of summer night. The dog barking in the yards of *khuttas* on the nearby streets did not count because it was just part of it.

One of them would start for another to snap up, and then still another continued the chain reaction of barking that floated far and wide over the Settlement. Only our Zhoolka hardly ever took part in their concerts, having grown too old and lazy. And—just a thought—what if you put together all the dog barking, adding even that beyond your hearing, eh? I mean, now the Settlement dogs had calmed down for a stretch, yet the dogs in Podlipnoye kicked up a fit of barking rising and flowing on the night air and so on and on, over into the next regions, countries, and continents. It turns out then that, as a whole, dog barking would, probably, never subside on the Earth, right?. And that's what they call the Planet of Humans!.

The best time for turning the receiver on was past midnight. Firstly, it's when they broadcast "The Concert After Midnight" in which there was not only aria's by Georg Ots but Din Reed's hits too. The concert was followed by another one – "For Those in the Sea"—from 1 till 2 o'clock—meant for the sailors of merchant ships and fishing trawlers. That's when they put real rock'n'roll on air. This was understandable though because round the clock transmission of Russian songs sung by Lyoudmilla Zykina and Josef Kobson were not enough to make happy the sailors who had seen the life overseas. And from about 4 till almost 6, there was jazz. Just two-three musicians: a piano, a double bass, and a drummer, but what music they made! "And now listen to the number called 'The Spring Mood', please…", and there followed such a number – wow! Best of the best… Well, and 6 o'clock was signaled by the anthem of the Soviet Union after which the everyday "Mayak The All-Union Radio Station" poured out its everyday hurdy-gurdy till next midnight…

Once I did not sleep all night long, because at dawn I had to raid the outskirts by the Swamp foraging for our 2 rabbits and bring as much hay as my bike could carry from those stacks along the Grove edge. The rabbits were given by Skully, who kept a lot of them in 4 or 5 cages, and Father told me to procure food for the presented pair.

And, after the raid, I thought that the day had already begun, and why not to find out for how long I could go without sleep and somewhere around noon, when I was playing chess with Sehryoga Chun on the porch of their *khutta*, next to the water pump, I felt that the sounds of talking came to me as if from afar or, like thru some woolen wall, and that I couldn't follow what exactly they were telling me. However, I still managed to somehow find my dacha… compartment up…sleeping bunk in…section the…

When I got up it was daylight around—already or still? I went to the kitchen in our *khutta*. The cuckoo clock on the wall wagged the pendulum and showed half-past five and in the tear-off calendar was the new day date. So, my sleep lasted longer than 24-hours?!.

Everyone laughed and said, "Phew! That's a champion sleeper!" Then it turned out that it was Uncle Tolik's prank to tear off an extra page in the calendar, while I was sleeping... I mean, them those rabbits also did not stay with us for long…

~ ~ ~

On that Sunday, I once again went to the Seim by bike, but already alone. The familiar road shot past much faster under the spokes carrying nothing but my weight because Sasha and Natasha were also coming to the Bay Beach by 2:10 local train, bringing a snack for me.

How could I know that after cycling and swimming the appetite breaks fiercely loose? By noon my stomach fell in, I ground my teeth and looked away from family groups sitting on their blankets around the delicacies they brought along. How long was it to wait yet? And I pricked up my ears when from different parts of the beach different receivers tuned to the one and only "Mayak The All-Union Radio Station" announced what exact time it would be after the sixth sounding of "peee!"

At last, 2:10 to Khutor Mikhaylovsky rumbled over the bridge across the Seim. Some 10 minutes later, the first groups of the arrived folks appeared from the distant Pine grove across the field. However, neither in the first wave of newly arrived nor in the following, my sister-'n'-brother never popped up. What the heck?!. Hadn't we arranged that I would wait for them on the beach? Oh, I'd wolf a bull down, yes, I would, right away.

Then Sasha Plaksin, who lived in Gogol Street opposite the water pump, came up to me to say that Natasha told him to tell me that they would not come because we were going to the Uncle Vadya's to celebrate his birthday and I had to come straight there.

"Was that all? Nothing else?"

"No."

Well, that's also right – why stuffing up your stomach before a birthday party? And I started back to Konotop with my stomach stuck to my backbone… The familiar road no longer seemed to be short. The pedals grew heavy and I did not sprint anymore but wearily turned them under the cheerless song of robbers in the "Morozko" movie, circling creakily in my mind:

"***Oh! How hungry we are!.***

Oh! How awfully cold!."

The forest was over, the path along the railway embankment also ended, and there still remained about half of the way ahead. Never before had I really realized the meaning of "I wanna eat!".

When the big billboard "Welcome to Konotop!" appeared at the road bend, I felt that I could go no farther and turned into a grassy ditch stretching towards the nearby windbreak belt. And along the whole ditch, there was not a single blade of any edible grass, which ages ago we showed each other at the Object…nothing but sparysh and equally inedible dandelions…and those who-knows-whats, with uselessly dry shoots… I chewed the softer part pulled from inside the shoot. No, that's not food…okay, just a little bit of rest in the ditch before the final leg to Uncle Vadya's… I was the very first guest there.

Before that summer day, I always wrinkled my nose at lard, and Mother would usually say, “Maybe, you’d like marzipan on a silver platter, sir?!” And ever after, I knew there’s nothing tastier than a slice of lard on a piece of rye bread.

(…not kosher for someone? Good news! The bigger my share…)

In July, the 3 of us, my sister-'n'-brother and I, went to the military-patriotic camp in the town of Shchors. The cards of admission were offered at our school, almost for free. So I had to put a pioneer necktie on again.

Shchors stood aside from the major railway lines and it took about four hours to get there by a diesel train. There we fell into the rut of usual pioneer camp routine with its “stiff hour” after the midday meal, occasional walks thru the small town for bathing in the narrow river under the railway bridge. Well, at least there was a library there…

Once, there happened an unusual day though. After getting up in the morning, only guys came to the camp canteen, where Senior Pioneer Leader announced that our girls had been kidnapped and, after breakfast, we would go to the rescue.

Wow! The old good game for kids, Cossack-Robbers, revised and bettered pursue following the arrows drawn on the sandy forest paths.

When the forest was over and replaced by the lined-up rows of a Pine plantation, we came up to a crossroads and split into small search parties, that scattered in different directions.

In the company of 2 guys, I went to the right. The road returned to the forest edge and eventually led to a lonely hut enclosed within a knee-tall palisade. Probably, the Forester’s dwelling.

Not a single breathing creature in the whole yard, not even a dog. Overpowering silence surrounded a readied coffin put on the ground with its lid leaning against the tree by the low plank-fence.

Now, you don’t seem to have much of a choice after Grandma Martha’s regular reading of *The Russian Epic Tales* to you, right? Of course, I stretched inside the coffin and asked the guys to cover me with the lid, just as hero Svyatogor asked his younger partner, hero Ilya of Murom, and they concurred.

I lay for a while in the narrow darkness not scary at all, filled with the pleasant smell of fresh shavings. Then I wanted to move the lid off, but it did not yield to my pushes, supposedly, fixed by the weight of the guys who sat upon it restraining their happy giggles.

I did not scream nor knocked against the lid. Familiar with the proceedings, I knew that any scream or shriek would only ring the coffin with an additional iron hoop, just like the Ilya’s smiting sword was adding them around the box which trapped Svyatogor. Silently, I waited in the darkness and then without any effort moved the lid aside into the desolate quietude of the

deserted yard. No wonder the brace of those nincompoops felt spooky straddling the ominously silent coffin and fled…

When I returned to the crossroads, everyone was already there and the kidnapped girls too, because it was time to go back to the camp for the midday meal…

I did not stay there until the end of camp shift though because Senior Pioneer Leader got a telephone call from the Konotop City Komsomol Committee informing her that I had to go to the Camp for the Komsomol Activists Training in the regional center, the city of Sumy.

On the last night before my departure, some local Shchorsian guys came to the camp to give me a beating. They even showed up in the bedroom ward windows to clarify with their gestures that I was a dead man already. Probably, I had flashed with an arrogant retort to one of them when bathing in the river under the bridge, or else some of the local girls, who also enjoyed the camp shift, had complained to them of my being too snobbish. The guys did not climb in though because of Senior Pioneer Leader’s presence. Later, she escorted me to the barrack of the platoon with my sister and brother to say goodbye before leaving early the next morning…

~ ~ ~

At the training camp for Komsomol activists in Sumy, we, 4 guys from Konotop, lived in a tent with 4 iron beds on the sand floor, and 2 of our compatriot-girls shared one of the bedrooms in the long barrack-like building nearby.

Besides that building, there was also a separate canteen and an open stage in front of rows of benches bounded by immature but already half-dead, cob-webbed Pine trees.

Each morning we sat on those benches, taking notes of the lectures read to us – I am damned if I remember what about. And in the afternoon we idly lay upon the cloth blankets over our beds in the tent, which was just a tent with no shows of the magic shadow theater on any of its walls.

(…we do loose worlds when growing up…)

I was the youngest in the Konotop group and just listened when the elder guys gave out their chin music about in what way the latest make of Volga was better than the out-modish Pobeda, and how to rightly break a motorcycle in, as well as about a guy in their neighborhood who got married at the age of 18. Imagine that moron! Married, when he still should be playing football with the guys in the yard…

Stretched on my bed, I had nothing to add to their confident discussions and just watched the Baturin highway dashing under by my “Jawa” taken there for the maiden ride or saw the grassy field by the garbage enclosure at the Object and us, ball-chasing kids, with our vain shrieks, “Here! Pass to me!” And I inwardly scoffed, recollecting ludicrous childish tales we told, in turn, each other about a hero footballer and the red band on his right knee because he was forbidden to kick the ball with it and umpires followed him closely otherwise goal posts were smashed to splinters by his cannonball hits and goalkeepers taken away on the stretcher.

Nah, sharing such prattle wouldn't be welcome in the dampish cave of the tent with Komsomol activists dropped around over their beds...

One guy from our tent could play the guitar which he borrowed from somewhere in the long low barrack building. All in all, his repertoire comprised just 2 songs: a ballad about a city the road to which you'd hardly ever find, and people there were straightforward bringing up whatever they had on their minds, and they preferred their lovers' hugs to the comfort of apartments, followed by a lively rock about skeletons walking in a file after enjoying some good stuff.

However, even with so limited number of songs, he always had an audience; the guitar strumming attracted guys from the nearby tents and the girls from their bedrooms in the long building.

I asked him to teach me guitar playing and he showed me the 2 chords he knew and how to beat out the rhythm of „eight“. Deep furrows from the guitar strings disfigured my left-hand finger pads. It hurt, but I still wanted to learn it so much...

In the CJR game against the team from the Sumy group we lost, but not in the contest of greetings for which I didn't plagiarize a single line from anywhere. We acted aliens who had lost their way.

"It was Mars we were going to!

Yeah-yeah!

It is you we've come to!

Yeah-yeah!.."

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Youth

After that summer many of my classmates were not around anymore, they moved or went to different technical and vocational schools. Kuba entered the Odessa Sea School, Volodya Sherudillo became a student at the Konotop Vocational School 4, aka GPTU-4, which institution among Konotopers bore the unofficial name of "Seminary" turning its disciples into "the seminarians". Skully endeavored to enter some Mining School in Donetsk but eventually landed in the Konotop Railway Transportation College.

The parallel class also suffered heavy losses and, even though one of their girls bore a baby at the vacations, leftovers of 8 "A" and 8 "B" were, nonetheless, unified into the single ninth grade…

On the first school day, after the ceremonial line-up concluded by the traditionally endless bell signaling the start of the first lesson in the academic year, our classroom was entered by Valera Parasyuk, handled Quak. He was a blonde tenth-grader running after some girl from the former parallel and popped up on the pretext of a casual visit just, like, to hello the guys.

The Ukrainian Language teacher, Fedosya Yakovlevna, handled Feska, with the straight parting in her colorless hair braided into a pitiful crown, came the second having ceded Quak about half-minute. Yet, full of sporting spirit, she indicated the door and ordered him to leave the classroom. Without much a-do Quak satisfied her demand, yet chose another, his own, way; he climbed onto the windowsill and departed in a jump off into the schoolyard. His black, well-polished, shoes flashed in the flight, a kinda bright goodbye.

Not for nothing the Chemistry teacher, Tatyana Fyodorovna, handled Hexabenzyl, was in the habit of bringing those his shoes to our attention, "If a guy's shoes shine that means he's looking after himself. Follow the example of Parasyuk whose shoes are always polished!"

So, Fedosya Yakovlevna, aka Feska, closed the window left open by Valera Parasyuk, aka Quak, and called the class to pay no attention to his antics because he didn't belong here anymore but transferred already to School 14 (which was the other of two schools in the Settlement) as long as he dwelt next to the mentioned school location and from now on he was the resident headache for teachers over there...

The best way to learn the worth of new acquaintances and getting rubbed along with each other is doing some mutual job... After a week of classes, the senior grades at our school were instructed to report present in the schoolyard on Sunday morning equipped with buckets because we were going to help the kolkhoz in the Podlipnoye village with harvesting their crop.

The day was glorious – a warm September day enjoying the bright sun in the blue sky. The clamorous column of students reached the edge of a cornfield and we were tutored on the technique of harvesting at hand. Tear the ear off the stem, shuck and drop it in your bucket. When the bucket’s filled up, take it to the common cob of ears and pour your share into it. The entirety of so simple actions becomes the process of "patronage assistance to a collective farm".

Each patronizer was put before a row of corn stalks to go along and harvest the ears on their way to the other end of the field. And off we went in one united push, mingling the ear dubs at tin buckets' bottoms with yells of cheerful juvenile, and the sagacious admonitions by caring teachers, and tangent yet loud bangs of thunderflashes thrown high in the cloudless sky…

It did not take long before I noticed my lagging behind the general progress. So, hauling another filled bucket to the cob, I paid attention that not all the cornrows were fully clear of corn ears. It seemed, the instructors failed to be explicit enough and emphasize that our objective was not collecting all ears in the field, but to select best of the best, the most gorgeous cream of ears, so to say.

Correcting my working practices accordingly, in no time I caught up with the main body of the patronizers, then got ahead, and overtook the avaunt-garde party which now grew to 4 advanced shock-workers.

Being ahead of the common mass of laborers has a number of advantages. First and foremost, you don't need to go back to the common cobs of the harvested corn ears. As soon as your bucket gets filled, you just pour the ears on the ground, becoming the founder of a new cob for pending contribution by those coming later.

A couple of guys from the avaunt-garde party chose the path of least resistance, throwing the ears from their rows in all directions, so as not to bother with shucking them. I did not follow their best practices though because the field edge could already be seen in the distance.

We went out to a fallow field, and for another half-an-hour lay prostrate in the grass, more fatigued by waiting for the general mass to join us than by our super-productive efforts…

In September, the Arkhipenkos moved to Ryaboshapka Street near the RepBase who allotted to a turner of theirs, Uncle Tolik, together with his family an apartment in a five-story block. The mode of life in our *khutta* turned more convenient because our parents went over to sleep in the kitchen…

Soon after, there appeared a new tenant in the *khutta,* Grigory Pilluta who had served his ten years for murder, and came back to his home sweet home. The slick forelock of dark hair screened his forehead and shaded the eyes in their steady stare down or aside. Silent and sullen, passed he the *khutta's* yard from the wicket to his porch way.

His return from jail did not put end to the Pillutikha's concerts thru the wall. Although one day, passing under their kitchen window, I heard his rude attempt at shutting up her stream of execrations pored against the whitewashed kitchen wall….

In the dead of night, I was wakened by Father looming above me in the scarce light of the desk lamp. Mother stood in the doorway from the kitchen, and Sasha and Natasha looked sleepily out from under their blankets.

Father told me that Pilluta was breaking our entrance door armed with a knife, and I had to climb down out of the room window and bring 2 axes from the workshop in the lean-to. There was no time for dressing up – thru the blackness-filled kitchen there came sounds of heavy blows at the door on the porch, and thick drunken cries addressed to Mother, "Open it, bitch! I'll get your guts out!"

I quickly brought the required tools and together with Father went to guard the door quaking under the blows accompanied by the animal howl of Grigory Pilluta. How long would the rim lock last?

We stood at the ready in our underpants and tank-shirts holding the axes in our hands. "Sehryozha," said Father in a keyed-up voice, "when he breaks in do not hit with the blade, use the butt!" Though scared, I at the same time wanted Pilluta to break in, the sooner the better.

He never did it. In the dark yard sounded Pillutikha's wails and assuaging male voice. It was Yura Plaksin, Grigory Pilluta's childhood chum from the *khutta* in Gogol Street, opposite the water pump. He led the drunk away with him... We left the axes by the door and went to sleep on.

In the morning, I observed the deep scratches left by knife stabs in the gray paint-coat in the entrance door. Good news it did not happen in winter, with the additional window frames inserted for warmth, those had no hinges and just sealed the whole of the window from inside, so how would I get out to the lean-to, eh? Then Yura Plaksin came on an early visit pleading not to inform the precinct militiaman about the incident...

One of the axes stayed in the veranda for a long time, until Grigory Pilluta moved somewhere in the city from his mother's *khutta* so as to keep clear from the harm. Stupid indeed of his mother to wind him up, and then run after Yura Plaksin's assistance, to save the obedient sonny from getting locked up again. Maybe, Grigory's departure had other reasons as well, how could I know? Another guy's life is a dark abyss for those outside. Later, I sometimes met him in the city but never more in the yard of our *khutta*…

With the Pillutikha's death, the population in the whole *khutta* grew drastically because Grigory sold his parental home to some newcomers from Siberia.

That fact did not mean at all that they were Siberians themselves. You could go there from any Republic, just get recruited for work and – full ahead. The so-called "chasing the long ruble" was mainly steered in that direction because salaries in the uninhabited Taiga places were much higher. Folks were coming back with their suitcases packed with money to the gills, so were the rumors. If they could manage it, of course, I mean to return at all. "The longer the ruble, the shorter the life-span" became a popular byword and not for nothing, you know.

One guy from the Settlement recruited to a mine beyond the Urals and in just 6 months they sent him back. There, in that mine, he was in charge of the machinery and equipment repair. Something stopped working, they switched the faulty contraption off and he crawled in to see what's up. At that moment the switch was turned on (they had forgotten he was inside or something) and that machinery chopped him so finely they had to sent his tenderized leftovers back home in a zinc box, kinda here you are, receive your canned sonny, please

In the Ballet Studio by Nina Alexandrovna, he was a leading dancer, such a tall brunette. When performing the Moldovan Jock he jumped higher than others with his legs wide apart in the air to spank the ballet boots by his palms. And the Moldovan waistcoat of black silk with sparkling sequins suited so well his crispy dancing hair…

The newcomers who bought Pilluta's half-*khutta* had been recruited to Siberia neither from Konotop nor even from Ukraine. They spoke Russian and did not understand many local words.

There were 4 of them, 2 childless couples, who split the half-*khutta* in further even halves. The somewhat older pair dwelt in the *khutta* next to ours, and the younger ones got the part with 2 additional windows looking into the street. Maybe, that's why they were a little more cheerful than the older pair. Although, in contrast to demised Pillutikha, the elders looked quite friendly too.

Our immediate neighbor, the husband in the senior couple, began to overhaul the brick stove in their kitchen and found a treasure hidden in the chimney. To Sasha and Natasha, as well as to the children from the neighboring *khutta* of the Turkovs, he distributed the bills of banknotes from his find. Those amazed me by their unheard-of face value. Earlier, the 25-ruble note, with the gypsum bust of Lenin turned in profile, was, in my opinion, the biggest piece of money imaginable, but no! The Turkovs kids played with one-hundred and even five-hundred-ruble banknotes, the size of a handkerchief each, illustrated with antique sculptures and royal portraits in oval frames plus the vignette-like signature of the Finance Minister of the Russian Empire. The currency issued by the Ukrainian Central Rada in the Civil War times was also played, not as picturesque though, but the curls in the signature of Lebid-Yurchik were not inferior to those by the Czarist minister.

By the way, there was a guy in my class whose last name was also Yurchik and by his first one – Sehrguey, like me, only he was taller and when our class lined-up for a PE lesson he stood the second in the rank. Yet, he hardly could be Minister Yurchik’s relative because he lived in Podlipnoye, most likely they were just namesakes...

When Father came from work, the neighbor called him over to demonstrate the box which he found the treasure in, as well as the hollow place inside the chimney where it was hidden. Then Father returned home and standing in the middle of the kitchen mused, "Seems, it was not only funny money there." He once again observed the stack of banknotes on the table and started recollections about his village relative on the maternal side.

Living under the Czarist regime, that fella mastered the skill of printing paper money for which purpose he had a special machine-tool. Life smiled on him until his business failed because of thoughtless impatience. It happened when entertaining his brother on a visit from the city, he bought vodka from their village store. The salesman noticed that the five-ruble note he got for the commodity was leaving blue marks on his fingers – the brothers were so eagerly impatient to celebrate their meeting that the money paint was not allowed to dry up properly.

In short, the printer man got exiled to Siberia and all his property confiscated. And his wife followed him, like those wives to revolutionary Decemberists doing their terms over there.

"That's what love is" said Mother in an attempt at sprinkling a pinch of sentimental spice into the all too earthy story.

"Bullshit!" burst Father. "The smart bitch got it that by the side of so qualified a diddler she even in Siberia would be much better off than home."

He gave out a content chuckle, and I also felt pleased that in my family tree there someplace was sitting a cunning counterfeiter. The fact of all that taking place long ago did not really tell on the satisfaction even though anything from before the Revolution seemed as distant as the harsh old times of epic heroes. But, of course, in the days of Gorynich the Dragon they did not print paper money.

A week later, Father's assumption got confirmed in a roundabout way by the husband in the younger couple (not as cheerful already as before). He shared the news that his friend disappeared in an unknown direction. After quietly quitting the job (his spouse followed the pattern), the older pair left without a goodbye to their neighbor-friends. Friendship is a smashing good thing, but hands off my tobacco, partner!

Soon the younger, noticeably depressed, couple left too. The Pilluta's part of the *khutta* emptied again and for long…

> (...those acquainted with the Soviet legislation wouldn't judge the runaways too harshly, any treasure found in the USSR became the state property minus 25% of its value to the lucky finder. No John Silver would sail near such a close-shaving wind...)

~ ~ ~

Because of getting trained at the regional camp for Komsomol activists, I was elected Head of Komsomol Committee, aka Komsorg, of School 13 and for several days next week I was free from classes. In the commission of 5 other Komsorgs, I had to attend the reporting sessions of Komsomol Committees in the city schools, under the supervision of the Second Secretary of the City Komsomol Committee. Besides me, among the commission members, there were 2 more trainees from the Sumy camp: the guitar player and one of the girls.

The reporting sessions were killing by their boredom because at every school the very same things were said the very same way in the very same words. After which the Second Secretary invariably demanded from us, the commission members, to take the floor with our critical remarks... The guitar player was good at those stodgy pieces, being used to strum the only two chords he knew…

> "Ever keeping aloft and honored their glorious pioneer traditions, the School 13 Komsomol members did their best to contribute their weighty share in the Annual All-School Collecting of Scrap Metal..."

Each autumn, half of the long rectangular schoolyard was divided into the sectors starting from the two-story "Cherevko's school" at the gate up to the workshop building. The sectors were assigned to different classes so that they knew where to dump the scrap metal collected by them.

The classes competed, the piles of rusty stuff grew, the augmentations checked, weighed and registered until one day the schoolyard was entered by a dump truck to move the collection away, usually in a couple of goes. The class winner was awarded the Honor Certificate handed to them at the nearest ceremonial school line-up.

Of course, we hardly ever cared for those certificates. What attracted us was getting together with all of your class and… well, not exactly all of your class, yet at least those who could or were willing to turn up and... A-and with a pair of handcarts rattling their iron wheels against the ragged cobblestones in Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street, or creaking wearily along the rest—dust'n'dirt-paved—streets, we ventured into the Settlement in search of scrap metal. Where exactly were we looking for it? It depended. Sometimes a classmate reported a neighbor willing to get rid of a heap of perennial metal layers in the corner of their yard. “God bless you, kids! Drive your handcart in, take all of that away!”

Yet, rusty basins, folding coach-bed springs, and bent nails were a too lightweight stuff to add much of respectability to your grade's scrap heap. Besides, champions for environmental purity were not an ofttimes species in the neighborhood. “So, what's wrong about that trash behind the shed? Rusty thru and thru? But you never know. One of these days it might come handy. A length of wire would nicely fix a fence plank so rotten that nails crash it to pieces. Get along, kids. Go! Go!”

That’s why the newly amalgamated collective of our ninth grade moved for a free search dollying their handcarts along the Plant wall in Professions Street... Like vultures circling in the westerns to locate a prey... At the far end of Plant, where the tracks of the marshaling yard multiplied innumerably, we wheeled around an obviously no man's wheel pair from a railway car. Yet, you couldn't load the multi-ton wheels on a pair of handcarts, otherwise, we'd win at the scrap metal competition in just one go.

On we soared seeking along the railway tracks, to no avail though. But then the guys peeked into a concrete tube section lost in the tall grass alongside the railway to discover a watermelon and a box of grapes.

"Clear as daylight, the station loaders lifted the fruits from some car in a freight train and stashed away for a while." supposed Volodya Sakoon from the former parallel.

We looked around more attentively at the rows of freight trains stilled silently in their tracks, immersed in the torpor of waiting...

Some dude from our party took out a knife to cut the watermelon from the find. Yet, it did not open even when gashed all the way about its equator because of being too big for the knife length. Only when hit against the concrete tube, the watermelon broke up in two, but its core, the so-called "soul", remained in one of the halves. Moistly red, and sugary, stitched with dark brown seeds... Soul… With swiftness never expected from myself, I dealt the sweeping "falcon strike" and by both hands claw-snatched the watermelon's soul. Stunned by my so completely out of the blue deftness, I magnanimously refrained from partaking in the remaining halves. The guys sliced them into handy pieces, while I enjoyed the rindless juice-dripping ball of watermelon flesh from out of my capped palms.

Even the girls couldn’t say “no” to grapes, yet about half of the box we left for the absent loaders who stole them so that they did not feel offended...

An hour later, following the lead from a stray acquaintance, we stroke it real rich on a scrap metal deposit, although at an entirely different spot... In the fence of iron pipes separating Bazaar from the Seminary, aka Vocational School 4, there was a hole thru which we dragged out lots of iron pipe offcuts, long and numerous enough to make a good load for both handcarts.

Next day the House Manager of the Seminary came to our school, identified their pipes in the scrap metal heap collected by our grade, and took them away by a dump truck. He asserted they served as the material for training seminarians in the turners group. However, our Principal, Pyotr Ivanovich, did not even scold us. But then what for? How could you guess the purpose of material dumped into the thicket of nettle? Nonetheless, when giving it a careful thought, you'd always find a good underlying reason for anything. And only my violently swift seizure of the watermelon's soul remained completely inexplicable for me... but it was groovy.

> (....in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn't realized yet that all my grieves and joys, ups, and downs, all my silly mistakes, and breathtaking insights sprang from that rascal in the unfathomably distant future who’s now composing this letter to you stretched on my back inside this here one-person tent surrounded by a dark forest in the middle of nowhere and the never subsiding whoosh of the river currently named Varanda...)

~ ~ ~

Unpredictable is the inception of friendship. You go home after school, and there Vitya Cherevko, your new classmate from the former parallel, also walks along Nezhyn Street.

"Oh! How come you're here?"

"Just goin' to Vladya's. He lives in Forge Street."

"Hmm. I'm with you."

Since that day I had two classmate-friends: Chuba, aka Vitya Cherevko, and Vladya, aka Volodya Sakoon...

Vladya hid his acned forehead under the long forelock of brown greasy hair that streamed down from the parting above his right ear. 2 or 3 half-ripe pimples on his cheeks were absolved by the beauty of his gorgeous large eyes sufficient to give heartburn to any cutie.

Chuba's black crispy hair had no parting, and his eyes were pale blue. He had a healthy blush in his cheeks and a finicky sprinkle of freckles over his neat nose.

For hanging out, we gathered on the porch way to Vladya's *khutta* where he lived with his mother, Galina Petrovna. In fact, it was half-of-*khutta* comprising a room and a kitchen. A box-table, an iron bed, and the brick stove filled the kitchen to the utmost, nothing else could ever be squeezed in, except for the hooks on the wall by the door to hang coats. In the equally narrow room there stood a wardrobe, a bit wider bed, a table with three chairs pushed under it (otherwise

you couldn't pass by) and an up-stand shelf topped with a TV. Both the kitchen and the room had a window in ages long need of paint. The blind wall opposite the windows separated their home from the neighbors' half-*khutta*.

Galina Petrovna had the job of a nurse at the Plant Kindergarten concealed in the bush between the Plant Park and the road diving into the tunnel of the Under-Overpass. At times, she was paid visits by her cousin. She called him Pencil or Pencilletto, depending on her current mood which, in its turn, depended on whether or not the cousin popped up with a bottle of wine on him. The honorific 'Pencil' was saved for officially dry visitations. I wouldn't hastily rule out his kinship because Vladya's and his eyes had something common in their look. Vladya's two elder brothers, who looked different from each other, and from Vladya as well, were separately traveling about the Soviet Union in their chase after the long ruble...

Among the guys from both Forge and Smithy Streets Vladya enjoyed well-deserved popularity. And it was not merely for the fact that his two elder brothers had managed to gain proper respect and unquestionable recognition in the eyes of the entire Settlement before they launched on their 'chase', and even though certain gleam of their reputation touched Vladya, yet, apart from all that, he had merits of his own. He could drive a fool like no other guy in the neighborhood.

In the Settlement parlance "fool driver" was someone up to fool you by their jive for one or another private purpose, yet mostly for mirthful entertainment. The subjects for such recreational fool-driving could vary widely. Here, for instance, he drove a fool about blocks in Scotland throwing logs in competition, which he told on behalf one of those kilted sportsmen:

"Well, that guy did not get it that I had already made my throw and he caught it square on the pate. That's when he kicked the bucket. What else would you do under such a predicament, eh?" And Vladya closed one eye while drowsily rolling the other one up under the still half-open eyelid.

Or he shared local news how Kolyan Pevriy, thoroughly well-oiled, took a lamppost for a passer-by. He bullied it for a starter, then went over to extorting a cigarette, but since the held-up lamppost neither talked nor showed proper respect, Kolyan began to kick the shit outta him in earnest...couldn't fell, though…

And one evening, our company on the porch was joined by a guitar borrowed from Vasya Markov, and Vladya sang the song about Count and his daughter Valentina, who fell in love with the page playing the violin so well. That's when and where I got into servile bondage and begged Vladya to teach me too. He replied that he also was learning from Quak to who I'd better turn directly, yet what the use when I did not have a guitar, and he couldn't give me the one he played because it was Vasya's who did not allow to farm it out or let be strummed by anyone except for Vladya…

If you dearly want something, the dream would come true in seconds, plus or minus a day or 2. There appeared a guitar! Vadik Glushchenko, handled Glushcha, from that same Forge Street, sold me his. And with no ripping off at the transaction, down the soundhole, you could read in the sticker inside: "7 rubles 50 kopecks. The Leningrad Factory of Musical Instruments."

The needed sum was almost immediately procured by Mother. True enough, the plastic handle on the third-string peghead was missing, but later Father took off the tuning machine, smuggled it to his work and welded a neat iron rivet in place of the lost one.

Quak gave me a crumpled sheet from a copybook with the invaluable, exhaustive, list and tablature of all the guitar chords in existence: "the small starlet", "the big starlet", "the poker", and "the barre". Just a little more and I would start singing about the Count's beloved daughter!. But no, I was not allowed that tiny stretch of time. Vladya's brother, Yura, on his way from Syktywkar to Zabaykalsk (or maybe vice versa), brought him a brand new six-string guitar, and I again remained hopelessly behind because on the six-stringed, aka Spanish, guitar there were neither "pokers" nor "starlets". And so I had to cut notches in the nut of my guitar for the six-stringed layout instead of the seven-stringed, aka Russian, one.

Mid-October, the weather was still soft and Galina Petrovna arranged Vladya's birthday party in their *khutta's* yard for her son to invite and entertain his classmates in the open air.

The table from the room was taken out into the front garden strip and, with the protective oilcloth stripped off, it turned to be a varnished sliding table long enough to span the stretch between the *khutta* and the wooden shed with latticed, veranda-like, panes, which in summertime served both a kitchenette and a bedroom.

It was at that celebration table that for the first time in my life I drank wine. What a stunner feeling! The world around got wrapped within the thinnest lacework of translucent—like dragonfly wings—pattern of floral petals passed thru with sheer tiny veins... Beautiful friends sat around me—the best of the best in the worlds—we were engaged in the wittiest conversation and Vladya's mother's laughter ringed so melodiously while the soft shadow beneath the bush of red currant grew darker, blurrier, and deeper…

With the onset of winter, another of my classmates, Lyouba Serduke, also had a birthday, and those who handed in two rubles to our Class Monitor, Tanya Krasnozhon, came to the khutta of the birthday girl.

Until then, all kinds of bigger parties were arranged exclusively at school, under the supervision of Class Mistress, Albina Grigoryevna. We gathered there in the evening, drank lemonade brought to the classroom by a couple of mothers, then they left and all the desks were moved into one corner to make room for playing Brook, and the guys from higher grades opened the door and peeped in, but Albina would drive them away with her pedagogic yells.

> (...it's a nice feel to hold a girl's hand in yours and pull her along thru the Brook tunnel of paired arms arched above the two of you, unless, of course, the hand you tow behind you is not moist with sweat otherwise, after you two become the concluding part to the tunnel, you'd have to wait until Vera Litviniva free you by pulling in her wake.
>
> Vera's flat nose is far from being lovely, still, her palms are always dry. She's a nice girl, in general, but Sasha Uniat from the tenth grade is after her in earnest. He's a good calm guy, yet you never can tell because at times even the calmest might turn jealous.

On the whole, it's better not to look for trouble, especially since Vera's lips are way too thin...)

In the large living-room of Lyouba's *khutta* on the floor in the fresh paint-coat of red, there stood a long table under a spiffy white tablecloth cluttered with all kinds of salads, pork jelly, sweetmeat, and lemonade.

When all participants to the celebration gathered, Tanya the Monitor handed the birthday girl the present bought for the collected rubles, Lyouba' parents put their coats on and went to some neighbors to let us have unrestrained fun.

The dudes began iterating to the wide veranda with the glazed lattice to sip on sly the hooch smuggled in by someone of them.

In a small bedroom next to the living room, a cozy disco was started up where the dimly lighted panel of the record player twirling the LP disk of instrumental numbers by The Singing Guitars served the only illumination for the whole room, if not to count the sliver of light that made its way from the corridor thru the gap between the curtains in the doorway pulled closely together.

From time to time, Lyouba' brother, a blockhead seventh-grader, thrust from the corridor his arm to click the switch on the wall behind a curtain and the bulb under the bedroom ceiling flashed up with dazzling crude light. The dancers would coil back from each other, their eyes in a tight squint, and yell at the darn moron, who'd laugh his stupid horse laughter and race back to the hooch sipping group in the veranda. And then the dude from the pair closest to the curtains would kill the light off again…

I did not go to the veranda but tarried at the table stowing away my favorite Olivier Salad. When I switched over to the lemonade, not so favorite as it used to be but still tasty, at the table, in fact, remained a company of two.

Tanya Krutas from the former parallel grade sat at the opposite side without eating or drinking anything because her arms were crossed on the chest beneath the mien of unconcealed displeasure in her countenance. I plucked up my courage, went around the table and stood next to her, saying, "Would you dance, please?"

She did not even look at me but, putting on an even more rejecting air, pursed her lips, rose and, with a slithering roll to her steps made for the disco bedroom.

They did not swap the partners there and, in the hissing intervals between the numbers, the pairs did not split and only waited for the start of the next one to wrap their arms around their partner, and press themselves back to the hugged torso... Tanya's thin waist slightly swaying in between my palms laid upon her hips made me feel drunk without any wine. My ears were filled with some pulsating rumble which did not tell though on the utmost alertness of my every muscle ready to immediately respond to the least movement of her hands resting on my shoulders. And I was not angry with the moron clicking the switch but, recoiling under the bright bulb, I gazed at her profile with the clear pale skin and the eye sternly staring down, I mutely adored the tiny bob

of her hair stringed below the back of her head. Her breasts were sooner circles than hemispheres, but even that what was there plunged me into the ecstatic trance of Corybants.

> (...frankly, I did not know so weird terms then and it is where Father would scoff again:
>
> "Piled up a mess of arty-farty words a kinda fleasome by a scrawny cur. You, tops hopper!"...)

Yes, I was on top of bliss, it was incurable, inevitable, love forever… After school, I waited for her going home just to walk by her side to the gate of our *khutta* because most of the School 13 students scattered over the Settlement thru Nezhyn Street. And I even went to School 5 to support our girls when they lost in the Volleyball Championship of the city schools. She also was on the team.

Their loss almost did not disappoint me, I was too busy falling deeper and deeper in love with her high cheekbones. And I forgave her her slight bowleggedness which, after all, was a characteristic feature by Amazons, the fearless and beautiful she-warrior riders. But how devastatingly nice she looked in her white sportswear shirt!.

However, with all my constant and admired being there I never managed to dissolve the incomprehensible displeasure always present by her. At the breaks between classes, as soon as I bobbed up by her side, she beckoned to one or another of her girlfriends. She even changed her route of coming back home from school and bypassed Nezhyn Street thru May Day Street.

Thus, all I could do was to just wither off...The ruins forlorn of the love unaccepted got lost in the tall listless snowdrifts piled up by the winter storms to bury the ashes of fire killed tracelessly off…

~ ~ ~

Persistent snowfalls met the participants in the winter stage of the All-Union military-patriotic game 'Zarnitsa' arriving in Moscow, the capital of our Homeland. 6 among those participants were from Konotop, together with their skis and a middle-aged supervisor...

Confident of the rubber bands fixed by Father years ago, I threw my skis onto the uppermost, third, level bunk, undressed, and climbed into the bed on the second level in the compartment of the first-class car. The lights in the car had been turned off already, yet behind the window, there stretched Platform 4 whose crust of firmly trodden snow reflected the glare of arc lamps above it.

At last, from the locomotive in the head of the train, there rolled nearing clangs of cars that yanked each other in turn. The domino effect hit our car too, it jolted and gaining smooth acceleration glided forward. To Moscow! To Moscow!.

On the evening of the following day, we left our skis in the vestibule of a huge school scarcely lit and empty except for a small group of tenants from the surrounding neighborhood who came to take us to their different apartments as bed-and-breakfast guests at their hospitable families.

Next morning, my hosts treated me to tea and hurriedly left for their work telling their teenage son to see me to the same huge school closed for the vacations. On the way, he insistently warned me to mark the route well, so that in the evening I could find their apartment where I was billeted to stay.

We had three meals a day in a huge canteen, not too far from the huge school, both surrounded by the neighborhood of huge multi-storied tower-blocks. And we skipped only one visit to the canteen, which happened on the day when we, together with our skis, were taken to the Taman Guard Division stationed outside Moscow.

There we ran to the attack thru the deep snowdrifts between young Fir-trees, and a soldier in his greatcoat also ran on skis among us smiling and bursting profuse blank rounds from his Kalashnikov assault rifle spilling the spray of spent cartridges into the deep snow. Later in the day, together with two hundred other guys, who arrived for the winter-stage 'Zarnitsa' in Moscow, we were fed with the midday meal in a soldiers' canteen at the Taman Guard Division.

The following day after an endless excursion around the city, our Konotop group arrived in the Red Square to visit the Lenin Mausoleum. We joined the dense line of people moving to it across the Red Square and for a long time kept nearing the Mausoleum while the twilight grew ever thicker above the slick black flagstones showing in patches thru the snow. The icy chill from the pavement pierced the feet even thru the thick soles of winter shoes, and I got pretty cold.

When there remained about fifty meters before the Mausoleum entrance, we learned that the working day was over and they locked it for the mummy to have a night’s rest. The supervisor led our group back across the Red Square to get warm in the brightly lit emporium of GUM, aka the State Universal Store, which worked to later hours. I doubted that the half-hour he allotted for getting warm would be enough to save my feet, however, the stretch did the trick.

In the subway car carrying us back to the hospitable neighborhood, the supervisor announced that 'Zarnitsa' was over, yet we had one more day in Moscow so the first thing in the morning we'd pass thru the Mausoleum and then go loose for a shopping spree.

However, the next morning after leaving my hosts' apartment, I tarried in the huge canteen and, on coming to the huge school, was told that our group had left already to visit Lenin in his casket. The watchman also was leaving until five in the afternoon, so he locked me inside (the weather outdoors was frosty) and all of that day I spent imprisoned in the huge empty school.

Almost all the doors in the building were locked. In the watchman's room, there was a phone and, having never used the device, I started learning. Not a too knotty task to stick your finger into one of 10 holes along the edge of phone dial-disc and wind it collecting random digits until there sounded beeps in the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello! Is that zoo over there?"

"No..."

"Then why the call is answered by an ass?"

(...yuck! you wanna puke even recalling...)

Soon after the watchman unlocked me, our group arrived and I was expressly reminded that we were going home the next morning.

In the apartment of my hosts, I saw *Twenty Years Later* by Dumas inside their glazed bookcase and asked where they sold such books. The hosts began to explain how many crossings were along the way to the bookshop, though it should be closed already. But I went out all the same…

It was dark and very quiet with rare fluffy snowflakes coming down from above, one after another. I stood by the glass walls of the locked bookshop with the feeble glow of distant light inside. Some supernatural emptiness wrapped all around in a profound immense silence... Then a belated passer-by walked soundlessly along leaving shallow steps in the soft virgin dusting over the pavement, and I went back to the home of strangers. There was "The Vertical" on TV, starring Vladimir Vysotsky…

~ ~ ~

We knew exactly what we wanted, we aimed at becoming a vocal-instrumental ensemble because in the then USSR there were no rock groups. Rock groups were an attribute of the decaying capitalist West, but in our Soviet state, free from the exploitation of a man by man, rock groups were named vocal-instrumental ensembles, aka VIA's.

The songs about the prosecutor, who raised his blood-smeared hand against the happiness and peaceful life of an honest pickpocket, were just a spring-board in our glorious career. Those upstart crows, so popular VIA's as The Singing Guitars, and The Jolly Guys, actually, stole our songs. It was us, who should have performed the hit about fetching the ring of Saturn to ask the one we loved to marry us, and no other but we and only we should have turned out that thrilling electric guitar vibrato ending to "The Gypsy Girl" in the LP Disc of instrumental numbers. But while we were busy training ourselves and sang that, when visiting Bazaar, instead of trade in pigeons there he hunted the passers'-by pockets, they leaped forward ahead of us. Still and all, we did not give up...

During the breaks in the two-story building of the "Cherevko's school", where the ninth grade was again transferred to, we gathered at the window on the staircase landing to make music. The triangle-ruler of light metal normally used for drawing figures in school copybooks was thrown on the windowsill to serve a musical instrument on which Sasha Rodionenko, handled Radya, was knocking out rhythmic backup to the songs.

Chuba at once crossed out any chance for me to be a singer though. The problem was not about my vocal cords but my ears, I just could not hear my own sharps from flats when singing. There was no way to argue with Chuba because he finished Music School in the class of button-

accordion and, as an expert, should hear better. As for Vladya's musical ear, Chuba admitted its presence and the fact that Vladya even had some kind of a voice, only it was hard to tell in which part of his anatomy it was sitting. Thus, there remained only two vocalists – Chuba himself, and Radya.

It's more than likely though that with all our zeal we would never progress any further than the mentioned windowsill, if after the winter holidays there did not appear a new teacher of Music at our school, named Valentina. She looked like a tenth-grader girl but styled her hair in the ladies' way of making a round cushion of hair atop of their heads.

At the lessons, she widely spread the billows of her accordion out and squeezed them vigorously back, and before the endless strident bell announcing the break shut up, she collected her instrument and hurried to the streetcar stop because she also taught Music at School 12.

Valentina promised we could go to the Regional Review of Young Talents, only we had to work hard because the Review was taking place next month. The girls she worked with at School 12 were to perform there and we might accompaniment their singing, the whole combination would pass for a VIA from the Plant Club because the Regional Review ruled out the participation of school students... Anything can be solved exceedingly simple if you know how to go about it...

The rehearsals were held late in the evenings, behind the blue blinds on the windows in the Physics classroom. Our string group was enhanced with one more guitarist from School 12. He looked more mature than a tenth-grader and did not conceal his special relation with Valentina, wrapping her neck with a scarf after the rehearsals in an unmistakably owner's manner, and then she trustingly leaned her head on his shoulder, walking along the dark school corridor to the exit.

The girls from School 12 appeared at the rehearsals just a couple of times, and not in full, but Valentina promised us that the singers knew their part quite well. At the final stage preview in Club, the day before starting off to the regional center of Sumy, there popped up one more singer, a corpulent dude of no school affiliation, who sang solo:

"Hello there, the field of Russia,

I'm a thin shoot of yours..."

The chorus of eight girls from School 12 performed a patriotic number emphasizing the fact that Komsomol members, first and foremost, take care of their Homeland and only after that they cater for themselves. Then Sasha Rodionenko, aka Radya, was giving out a song by Vysotsky about the mass graves.

Supposedly, we cut a nice picture – the line of eight white-shirted girls in front of two microphones, Valentina with her shining accordion, Skully standing behind a single drum on its rack, three guitarists with their acoustic guitars hanged on package strings over their shoulders, and Volodya Elman handling the double bass.

Where did Elman come from and why without any handle? He was a tenth-grader from our school and lived in the end of Smithy Street, in the *khutta* next to a century-old Birch tree. In spring, they milked it, gathering about a dozen of three-liter glass jars of the Birch sap. But the sap, of course, was not all for Elman alone, because it was a long brick *khutta*-block of four apartments. And the absence of a handle was easily explained by the fact that his last name, by itself, sounded like a criminal handle— "L-man".

As for the double bass, it was handed out to him by Aksyonov, Head of the Variety Ensemble at Club. Head couldn't say "no" to the drummer at his Variety Ensemble. It's hard to suppose though that Elman had much knowledge or any skills at playing the double bass, more likely his eagerness to get integrated into the glorious world of the music industry was as great as mine. He joined us without a single rehearsal, at the stage preview in Club. Valentina asked him to play the double bass as low as possible and not too often. However, Elman could not keep his zeal in check and, by the end of the stage preview, two fingers on his right hand were bleeding because their skin got rubbed off against the sturdy strings. To somehow pull them at the Regional Review in Sumy, he bandaged his torn fingers with electrical tape..

Eleonora Nikolayevna, the nominal Head of Children Sector, went along with us, as the official head of our Youth Ensemble, in one of her blouses of starched immaculateness and a cameo brooch under the collar. The long earring, no doubt, dangled in place…

We went to Sumy by the morning diesel train. While waiting for it, I was strangely struck by the sight of our three guitars leaning onto each other, like a stack of rifles on the snow-clad Platform 1. Some piercing nudity…

The Regional Palace of Culture buzzed like a beehive, crammed up with young talents who arrived to show themselves in the Review. We were auditioned in a separate room by a couple of people with block-notes and they tick-marked us for participation in the gala concert at five in the afternoon. All the neighboring rooms were also filled with auditions and rehearsals in full swing. In one of them for the first time in my life, I heard and was stopped in my tracks by the mesmerizing caterwauling of a live electric guitar. Wow! The whole room drowned in the swaying vibrato sounds...

We went out for a midday meal in a nearby canteen, where I fell under the spell of Sveta Vasilenko, one of the chorus girls from School 12. Coming back to the Regional Palace of Culture, I walked by her vacant side like a dog on the lead because her other side was escorted by her lanky girlfriend holding her by the arm. My schoolmates, following closely behind, kicked up a hailstorm of stupid giggling and heying addressed to no one in particular, which did not sober me in the least.

During the final rehearsal, Sveta won me over to the hilt. From the compact line of young chorines in white blouses and strict black skirts, she kept casting at me flip glances of her black glittering eyes just to drop them modestly down, or direct at the ceiling above... In more than one book, I happened to read that beauties knew how to shoot with their glances, but never could I imagine that those shots could fell you on the spot.

After the rehearsal was over, there remained two hours of waiting before the gala concert, so I approached her and invited to the cinema. She was not sure about it and hesitated, even though her girlfriend, who turned out not so lanky, after all, but quite a nice individual, backed up my proposal persuading Sveta to go with me, and why not, eh? Our united efforts failed to overcome Sveta's uncertainty, however, I still managed to get her flat refusal and left carrying away my shot-thru heart.

I was at the doorsill of death all the way to the movie theater where I plunged into the magical world of the seventeenth century France, with Gerard Fillip and Gina Lollobrigida in the "Fanfan the Tulip". They reanimated me.

How was our performance at the gala concert? With my defective musical ear, I'm not the right guy for making judgments. However, when three guitars strum the same chords in unison, there's not a fat chance of guessing whose one is out of tune. The electrical tape on the Elman's maimed fingers remarkably softened down the dubbing of the double bass. Skully's drum was not too acute because instead of sticks he used jazz drumming brushes. Valentina's accordion, rolling over her energetic body, kept covering all er-harmonic inaccuracies and chance falling out of key. I believe that, on the whole, all that sounded fresh, and torrid, and full of both youthful zeal and (most importantly!) eager patriotism.

After the concert, a bus from the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, waiting for us by the Regional Palace of Culture, fully justified Eleonora Nikolayevna's presence at the Review of Young Talents.

On the bus ride home, everyone was giving meaningful looks at both me and Sveta though we did not sit next to each other. The chorus girls kept singing all kinds of songs about the eyes that drive us mad, and "Sveta's shining, Sveta's dazzling..." substituting her name for "the moon" in the well-known folk song. Sveta was snapping back at them, but me all their hints left undisturbed, I just did not care.

The following day at school, Volodya Gourevitch kept stupidly cuckooing about our competitors from the School 12 CJR team having turned me into their agent, each repetition of the jest was concluded by his protracted laughter. And at a break between the classes, Tolik Sudak from our grade, for no reason whatsoever, started sharing in a group of guys that Sveta Vasilenko was a daughter to Head of Militia Station and once she came to school in a skirt with jism splotches.

If anyone allows themselves so offensive allusions about your beloved, you have to demand satisfaction at a duel. However, at PE classes Tolik stood the first in the line. He was a hefty guy from Podlipnoye and always knew everything, probably, because his mother taught Math at our school. That's why I just stood by as if all that had nothing to do with me, and silently hated the blond curls and drowsy stare of Tolik Sudak's pale-blue eyes.

Soon after, the combined Youth Ensemble participated in a Club concert but when it was over I did not try to see Sveta home. What killed my love? The monotonous joke and loud laughter of Volodya Gourevitch? Or, maybe, Tolik Sudak's disparagement of the stained skirt?

Frankly, the heaviest blow was dealt with by the fact of her residence in Depot Street which was another unfavorable neighborhood for those in love. Vadik Glushchenko, aka Glushcha, escorting a girl to her *khutta* in Depot Street and was stopped there by a gang of 10 who knocked him down and kicked from all the sides. "The main thing is to cover your head with your arms, then you got woozy and the kicks grew dull," so he later shared his enlightening experience…

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The end of winter was postponed because of so huge a snowfall that Nezhyn Street had to be cleared by a bulldozer pushing mounds of snow off the road.

On my way back from school, instead of walking along the cleared way I chose to leap along the ridge of snow heaps moved aside towards the fences. The fun was cut off by a sharp pain in my groin, so the remaining way to our *khutta* I followed the prints of the bulldozer tracks.

In the evening, Mother, worried by my moans, demanded to demonstrate what was the matter there. After my refusal, Father said, "Show to me, then, I'm also a man." The scrotum, swollen up to the size of a teacup, felt hard to the touch. Father frowned and when Mother asked from the kitchen, "So, what's there?" He said I had to see a doctor… It was an awful night – the agony of panic and despair...

In the morning, walking with painfully shortened steps, I came with Mother to the Railway Polyclinic nearby the Station. In the reception, they gave me a slip of paper with my number in the queue to the doctor. We got seated on the chairs next to the specialist's office in the hollow reverberating corridor. When it was my turn to enter the white door, I, averting my eyes, told Mother that if needed I agree to be operated on, let only everything be normal.

The doctor was a woman, but either her white robe gave her the status of man, or the fear to lose something beyond my current ken, erased my shyness. The doctor said it was a sprain and all I needed were spirits compresses. Two days later, the scrotum returned to its usual shape and I forgot my agonizing fears…

On the seventh of March, Vladya brought to school a miniature bottle of cognac. We shared the booze between 3 of us, sipping from the tiny bottle's neck. Some warm glowing filled my mouth, and we laughed louder and oftener than usual, but there was nothing like the bliss from the wine at Vladya's birthday.

We were dismissed early because it was the eve of Women Day, and when I got home the influence completely disappeared except for the heaviness in my head. I climbed onto the *khutta's* roof, because already for a week Father chewed my ear to dump the snow from up there.

The tips of four brick chimneys, barely protruding from the snowdrifts, helped to outline our part in the roof. It was rather steep, and in the final stretch my felt boots slipped and I fell into the narrow back garden. The landing was successful – on both legs and into a deep snow, however, when I saw the cusps of the low palisade between the back garden and the yard of the Turkovs, stuck up from the snow an inch off my thigh, my feet grew cold with horror.

(....in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn't realized yet that all my grieves and joys, my ups and downs sprang from that rascal in the unfathomably distant future who’s now composing this letter to you stretched on my back inside this here one-person tent surrounded by a dark forest in the middle of nowhere and the never subsiding whoosh of the river currently named Varanda...)

End March a team of doctors came to our class to have the physical examination of the dudes to register us as future conscripts.

While the girls were taken to another room for some special lecture, the physicians told us to undress and demonstrate them our backs and sit on a chair for them to knock a rubber hammer beneath our knees, besides the height-measuring and cock inspection.

In my draftee card, the line for "sexual development" was marked with ‘N’. When the commission left, Tolik Sudak explained that "N" stood for "normal" and all the dudes got that mark except for Sasha Shwedov, and the girls, who returned after we got dressed, somehow found it out and that's why now they were whispering to each other and exchanging informed giggles…

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The summer started with the examination session for the ninth grade. Of all the exams, Chemistry was the most feared one – a normal guy from the Settlement could not really bottom all those benzyl rings and their atomicity.

Following the majority of my classmates, I memorized the answers to just one of the twenty-five question sets, aka "tickets", from the Tickets List. At the exam, hand-made cards with ticket numbers were strewn face down on the desk of examiners for us to choose. My chances were one to twenty-four and I lost. However, the teacher of Chemistry, Tatyana Fyodorovna, handled Hexabenzyl, began, for some unknown reason, pulling me out and, eventually, evaluated my ignorance by "four".

(....in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress —I hadn't realized yet that all my, etc., etc...)

Physicist Binkin, who, strangely, had no handle among the students, at that examination was Assistant Examiner and used his position for demonstrating the cards to Vladya. Picking a slip from the exterminators’ desk, Binkin would keep it up, face to Vladya, and bob his head encouragingly before he put it back and get over to the next one. As fair a play as one could wish.

Unfortunately, Vladya was seated in the end of the classroom, loaded with handfuls of the cribs prepared by diligent girls, who had already passed the exam and dumped to him their cheat sheets. But who can get it seeing for the first time in your life all those formulas scribbled on an inch-wide accordion-folded paper-strip in a handwriting three times smaller than normal? Of

course, Vladya would jump to the opportunity of swapping the ticket in hand for that one whose answers he had learned by rote.

For Binkin his fair play was an innocently sadistic fun because at such a distance Vladya couldn't make out the numbers, however hard he squinted. So, he had 2 more wild attempts by which dint he exhausted the ticket swap quota and, though raising his chances to 3 to 25, missed again. Still and all, he didn't flunk and got his "three" as well as the comment from Binkin, "Your unalloyed proletarian origin secured this mark for you…"

I never quibbled about my clothes, put on and wore just what was given, and Mother made sure the things were neither torn nor dirty. So the new addition to my wardrobe—a jacket made of leatherette to the patterns from *The Working Woman* magazine—appeared on Mother's initiative and it was her to sew it.

The money to buy leatherette was found because Father moved to work at the RepBase as a locksmith again and his earnings grew by 10 rubles a month. The jacket looked classy, of a nice brown color but cuffs and the belt of a darker cloth. If watched from afar, it even glistened in the sun... In two weeks the leatherette at the elbows fretted to its gunny base, but at the moment when I received my award, the jacket still had good looks.

Yes, the Trade-Union Committee of the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant rewarded me for outstanding participation in amateur activities. At the All-Plant trade-union conference in Club, the Chairman of the Plant Trade-Union Committee personally handed me not a useless Certificate of Honor, but a sizable paper packet which contained dark rubber fins and a mask, yet, sadly, no snorkel.

Nonetheless, I took the equipment to the Seim once, but swimming in the fins turned out much harder than you might think when watching flicks alike to "The Amphibian Man". Besides, water found the way to penetrate inside the mask and get into my nose, but then, perhaps, it couldn't be otherwise... However, I was not too keen on studying the bottom life of large water bodies because my main concern that summer was finding a job. I desperately needed money, lots of it, because of my "horselessness".

Vladya had a motor scooter "Riga-4", Chuba drove "Desna-3", Skully reconstructed his bike into a moped, and when a flock of the Settlement scooter-riders buzzing their motors scudded along Peace Avenue, he did not fell too far behind... Yet, "Riga-4" was the coolest. Vladya, of course, allowed me to drive it a couple of times — the buzz of the engine, wind in the face, speed operating, delight! But begging Chuba's scooter for a ride was of no use. Straddling his "Desna-3", the feet firmly on the ground, he'd only scoff in answer.

"Let me, eh? Don't be greedy."

"I ain't greedy, I am gritty!"

"Churls aren't gritty. One ride to Professions Street and back, I swear!"

Another chuckle at nothing funny.

"A scrimpy asshole!"

But Chuba only scoffed again.

Skully's moped I did not want myself; but where to get money to buy a scooter? That was the question...

Mother said that a guy after the ninth grade might get a job at the Vegetable Storage Base, if he applied at the Head Office of the Department for Workingmen Provision, aka ORS, near the Under-Overpass.

It sounded a great idea, there should be truckloads of strawberries and watermelons too were surely passing the Vegetable Base before they got on sale at stores. But would they give me a job if I wasn't sixteen yet? In the long narrow corridor of the barrack-like ORS Head Office, I felt more uptight than thru all the session of summer examinations at school. And I got the job! So began my labor career…

The Vegetable Base was located at the end of Depot Street and I was getting there by bike. Besides me, the enterprise employed about 10 other summer hands, mostly from School 14. I recognized one of them – a short guy sporting long hair, handled Luke, he it was who slapped me in the face for shooting in his back. The guy tacitly let the bygones be bygones, and so did I, of course.

The initial couple of days on the job we were sorting boxes, just empty boxes with no strawberries whatsoever. The whole ones were stacked in the shed, those in need of repair piled next to the shed, while split and shattered throwaways had to be schlepped to the stoves under the open sky in the middle of the Base yard…

Arriving in the Base, a truck with a load of vegetables goes onto a weighbridge to get weighed. After dumping the cargo they weigh the vehicle once again; the difference between the loaded and empty truck shows the weight of the brought vegetables if only the weighbridge works correctly. That's where arises the need for a trained calibrator who knows how to tune the weighbridge. To do the calibration, you also need a trial one-ton load of 20 kg pig iron weighs, as well as some workforce to move that ton from one corner of the weighbridge to another, to another, to another, to the middle...

The job of hands at calibration disclosed who of us was who. At first, it was like a sporting event, we carried the weighs racing ahead each other, by the third corner we started to notice which of us shirked and who was going to the end...

Then for two or three days, we cleaned the potato storage block of its stock gone rotten in winter. I never imagined there could be so sickening a stench in the world. Wrapping our mugs in our tank tops, we dragged that horrid muck out, in two-handle wicker baskets, to dump in the thicket of tall grass on the Vegetable Base outskirts. The number of working school guys diminished to 5…

The main workforce at the Base were women in black robes and pattern-printed kerchiefs on their hair. They sorted the carrots or beetroots in the respective blocks, and we moved and stacked the boxes filled by them. Sitting in a circle around a dusty knoll of vegetables, they never stopped yakking, not for half a minute, faith. They were telling each other endless sagas of "he" and "she". About how that "she" of theirs grew fat, then skinny, then got to the hospital, then told her mother she couldn't live without him, then died, then cheated on him and fled with someone else... And "he" was tall, then short, then pot-bellied, then bald, then black-haired, then a drunk; "he" refused to pay alimony and asked to marry him, they treated him for alcoholism before “he” ripped off the linoleum from the kitchen floor to take it to his lover widowed two times...

And so they would pour out their chin music until the blonde guy from School 14, Long by his handle, addresses the peppiest one in the circle of squaws seated on the upset empty boxes, "Well, you give or what?"

"At once!" says she. "But when in I'll squeeze and tear your little willie clean off you, kiss it goodbye, lover!"

And the lady-squaws would start to silence her by oops and pfffs and "watch your mouth! It's a kid you talkest to!"

For the midday meal, I rode home – 20 minutes there, 20 minutes back, 10 minutes for soup and tea or, maybe, compote.

Thus, 4 times a day I gained the first space velocity pedaling all the way down the concrete dive into the Under-Overpass tunnel. Who, of the Vegetable Base hands, does not crave for crazy speed? Whee-hoo!.

Each morning Head of the Vegetable Base was allocating jobs for the present workforce. A couple of times I got a coopers' helper job. The area in front of their stocky workshop was crowded with hogsheads in need of repair. I rolled or dragged the vessels in, depending on their current condition. Two mujiks in caps and aprons knocked the iron hoops off, and the barrel fell apart turning into a heap of slightly bent staves which they called *klepkas*. The coopers sorted them, threw the hopeless off, and filled up for the shortage from the stock of odd *klepkas*. They planed and fitted them to each other, collected flat round bottoms from straight lags to insert them on both ends of the resurrected barrel and drive the hoops back.

Of course, I knew that when saying "a klepka’s missing in his head" folks meant the same as when they said "not all at home" or just "crazy", but it was in that workshop that I got it where that meaning came from – you cannot fill a barrel with a missing klepka, it's as impossible as filling a cup whose walls are crazed.

The refuse I hauled to the same idle stoves in the yard with the iron cauldrons embedded in them. The coopers worked unhurriedly, fixing two or three barrels a day, and the time by their side passed so very slowly, but in their workshop, there was a pleasant smell of timber shavings...

By the masons, it smelled of damp earth. They worked in a long basement bunker, replacing a log wall with a brick one. And they also wore caps and aprons; the caps were the same as on the coopers, but the aprons of a sturdier tarp.

I was so eager to try my hand at laying a wall, at least a little. The older mason allowed me to lay one course. He was standing by and smiling at something, although his grim partner grumbled along that what I did was not proper.

My helper-partner from School 14 also grumbled all the time, however, not on the subject of masonry. His standing point of dissatisfaction was Head of the Base. Being unhappy about having such a bitch of a boss, he shirked the work which Head was allocating for 2 of us. I did not mind doing more than my partner, only it seemed not right so I was glad when he decided to quit at all...

And then the cucumber season began. They were coming in by cars pushed by a small diesel locomotive along the sideway tracks entering the Base grounds. The cars were filled with boxes of cucumbers that had to be moved to the stoves in the yard, in whose cauldrons the brine with smelly dill was boiling, and crowds of pickle barrels stood around, with their lids removed, prepared to get their load of cucumbers for pickling.

The already familiar squaw-team worked there, but they did not have time anymore for chin-wagging about "her" and "him". They cooked the pickling *oozuar* in the stove-embedded cauldrons under iron lids and poured it into the barrels loaded with cucumbers.

I did not aspire to become an *oozuar*-cook, I was satisfied with the job of a stoker feeding the stoves with the wood-waste from broken boxes and split *klepkas*, some of which had to be shortened by an ax. In general, it was not a conveyor job – they would call and tell when to add the fuel, and then again go and get seated someplace, and wait for the next call.

And I sat in the shadeless yard under the scorching sun way off from the stoves by which it was hellishly hotter. To while the time between calls, I practiced taking chords of a six-stringed guitar: from D-minor to A-minor, to E-major. A narrow cask stave grabbed from the pile of fuel served the guitar neck. The lady-squaws laughed from about the boiling cauldrons, "Found your missing *klepka* at last?"

Without paying them any attention, I took B-7th and thought of Natalie…

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If you walk along the sidewalk and meet a girl with a kerchief around her neck tied not like the pioneer necktie though but with the knot moved onto her shoulder, you get it immediately that she knows what's what in the chic style. And at once you feel like coming up to ask her name, and start a talk.

But how to speak up? What to say? Who cares to get "piss off!" in answer and then feel yourself a squashed tomato?. However, it's quite another kettle of fish when you know that the stylish

girl's name is Natasha Grigorenko, and you have even tried to learn ballroom waltz as her partner, under the button-accordion of Volodya Gourevitch, aka Ilyich.

"Hello, Natasha! How you doing?"

"Oh, Sehryozha! Is that you? Actually, at School 12 everyone calls me 'Natalie'."

We happened to be walking the same direction and I saw her to the corner of the street she lived in, Suvorov Street, opposite the middle driveway into Bazaar.

> (...or was it she to greet me first on that sidewalk? After all, for tying the kerchief that dashy way one needs not only the grasp of fashion but being of a resolute cast as well...)

Whoever started it, but the next step was made by me. Maybe not too soon. In a week or so. Or was it even a month?. Anyway, I made that decisive step, or rather a very resolute jump.

Radya and I were riding the back steps in the Settlement streetcar, getting fanned by the strong counter wind. And when the streetcar rumbled along Bazaar, I suddenly turned my head and glanced across the road into Suvorov Street. Not that I had any reason for that, yet not far from the corner, two girls were playing badminton. Sure thing, I immediately recognized Natalie's long straight hair.

"Bye, Radya!" And I jumped off without answering his, "Where to?"

Yes, no mistake – it was she. Her partner also turned out to be my former classmate, Natasha Podragoon, who, as well as Natalie, went over to School 12 because of the Math and Physics specialization there.

Of course, I immediately fired up some yakety-yak about providing free masterclasses to share proper skills for taming their shuttlecock. And then—could you imagine!—one more chance passer-by turned over the corner. Radya obviously jumped off before the stop at our school, although he had been going to visit his Grandpa.

Natasha Podragoon went home soon, because both Radya and I talked to her so too little, if at all, on account of her being fat. Natalie invited us into her *khutta's* yard, where, on a table dug into the ground, lay a stack of Czech *Film a Divadlo* magazines. I got carried away with perusing the pictures, and Radya snapped up the conversational initiative.

But then from the neighbor garden, two missiles of dry earth lumps whooshed, though missing under. Natalie yelled at the boy she would complain to his parents, but for Radya that seemed not enough, and he ran to the garden fence to whip the snotty fool up with an elder guy's lecture. Or maybe, he wanted to show off his sporting bearing, because he, after all, had been attending the volleyball section at the Youth Sports School for two years.

Either Natalie somehow sympathized with the ten-year-old Othello of her neighbor, or Radya, despite all his training, crushed some of the potato bushes on his run, but while the jock was

bullying the boy behind the fence, Natalie told me to come on Thursday because she had more of those magazines. So we started dating, me and Natalie.

Perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that she was dating me because I did not know the way of doing dating. I just came to 8, Suvorov Street, on the appointed day, greeted her mother, sat on the couch and turned the pages of another *Film a Divadlo* magazine. Some people know how to live! And where only could them folks manage to get such magazines from?

Then her father came home from work on his motorcycle with a sidecar. He had the same round chin as Natalie, and he gave her his permission to go out for a walk till ten, but no later than half to eleven. And we went out.

She talked a lot, yet not for just to flap her chops like many others. Natalie became my enlightener. Despite the long years of reading addiction, there was so much I did not know yet… That the coolest candies were "Grilyazh", only they were not on sale in Konotop. You had to go after those sweets to Moscow or Leningrad, and even there it's not a snap to find the treat... That the most delicious sandwich was bread and butter with layers of sliced tomato and boiled egg. And it should be rye bread, of course… And that Louis Armstrong had the hoarsest voice of all the singers in the world.

Following her lead, I borrowed a book of poems by Voznesensky from the Club library. I knew where it stood on the shelves but always bypassed because it was poetry. So that's what the real poetry meant!.

But immeasurably more than for filling my educational gaps, I needed her for the giddy thrill swoons. For example, when we were walking to the Peace Movie Theater and she allowed to hold her arm. Gee! That's impossible to describe! I felt the delicate skin of her forearm because she had a summer frock on and I held her biceps gripped tenderly. Although girls have no biceps to talk of. And because of all that I was on a full flight, I swam in thrill starting from under the bridge over Peace Avenue, past Zelenchuk Area, and almost to Peace Square. Before we reached it, she explained that it would be more correct when the girl herself holds you by the arm, and we went on walking the way she shared.

Also nice, though not quite the thing before that... And then I got hit by a ball-lightning because, walking as freshly explained and absorbed in the conversation, she half-turned to me and—O!—her tight right breast pressed lavishly to my forearm...the bliss that stops your pulse...

So, I had what to think about by the stoves in the Vegetable Base yard, while practicing chords on the missed but eventually found *klepka* of mine…

It's hard for those enlightened to abstain from sharing the light of truth they've seen... I attempted to bring the revelation over to my sister. We were walking along Forge Street towards Club when she said, "Come one, I'll take my brother under the pretzel!" and she took my arm.

"Listen, Kiddy," said I because we, my brother and me, and our friends, and all ours rarely called her by name but only "Kiddy", or "Red-Haired" by default. "Wanna me teach you a trick that any dude would be yours in no time?."

"O, really?" my sister said in answer, "Is that what you're talking about?" And she half-turned to me while we walked on touching her breast to my forearm.

What an arrogant innocence! Such a naive arrogance! How could I—for a split second—imagine there was something I would ever be able to learn before my younger sister? I had to apologize, and all the remaining leg to Club we laughed like mad at what a self-confident patsy I was.

But no happiness goes on forever... At one of the evening going-outs with Natalie, some dude came up to us between the Under-Overpass and Bazaar and we stopped for a talk nearby the closed already Deli 1. Or rather they talked because of being from the same school, and I just stood there like an odd lamppost.

He had a cool shirt on, I had not seen anything like that before—red and green stripes as wide as in pajamas. Not that I had ever had pajamas, but they could sometimes be seen in movies... He rhapsodized which of the Moscow universities he would enter because his uncle was a diplomat and knew everyone there. And he, the uncle, invited him to go to the Black Sea after the entrance exams by his, uncle's, Volga so that the attractive nephew would serve a bait to lime the girlies.

Then they see-youed each other and we parted, but the chat had obviously put Natalie out of humor. Already at her *khutta* gate, she told me that she had already been dating a guy and once late in the evening they were going on an empty bus and he looked back at the conductor in her seat by the door, and said, "Conductor is not a human," and kissed Natalie.

And then I also felt down in the dumps, because it was clear that they were kissing without conductors as well. And I thought that it was, probably, that same red-green yakker but I didn't ask questions. That evening all the way from Suvorov to Nezhyn Street I walked forever crushed by grief…

In those times to gauge a Konotoper's level of prosperity was a trivial task – you just inquired if they had a hut at the Seim river.

Upstream from the Bay Beach, about half-kilometer closer to the railway bridge, the Willow thicket on the bank was gashed by a long gully. At the end of that inlet, amid abundant growth of pliant Willows, there stood some four to five dozen huts of the Partnership "Priseimovye".

True, it called for a certain stretch of liberality to use the name of "huts" for those thrown together booths with deal-walls under the roofs of tin. They were small in size – for a couple or three iron beds on the floor of sand. No window was needed; on their arrival to relax in nature's lap, the hut owner kept its door open all day long.

But if they were a fisherman, they would lock the door and go down to the gully, where a row of long narrow flat-bottom skiffs stood afloat, chained and padlocked to the pales in the sandy bank. Putting the tackle on the bottom of their boat, they would unlock the weighty padlock, get seated in the narrow stern and paddle with a single oar to come out of the gully to the expanse of the Seim river, and then proceed to their favorite fishing place, the spot where they kept chumming fish with caked chaff.

Having a hut was of great convenience – you could go swimming to the Bay Beach (directly two hundred meters thru the Willow thicket), come back and cook your meal on the Primus stove, blazing its blue flame on the table dug into the sand next to your hut.

Many people went to their huts by the local train on Friday evening and returned by the last one on Sunday. While having no hut on the Seim, you could go there only Saturdays and Sundays; in the morning – there, and by 17.24 or 19.07 – back to Konotop.

When Kuba arrived in the summer after his first year at the Odessa Sea School, we, sure thing, decided to rush to the Seim. Only we had to wait for the weekend because of my job at the Vegetable Base, besides, it was on weekends only that the ORS booth trucks came to the Bay Beach to sell ice-cream.

"Skully says, Grigorenchikha's become your squeeze, eh?"

"Tell Skully her name is 'Natalie'."

"Okay, whatever. Then invite her too."

Natalie agreed quite easily and we went all together: Kuba, Skully, I and Natalie. When we got off the train and were discussing where to—the Bay Beach or the Lake at the Pine grove?—Natalie suggested crossing the Seim, over there'd be not as much of a madhouse as on the Bay Beach.

On the other riverbank, there also were huts whose owners, if arrived on Friday, the next morning were meeting theirs from the Saturday train to take them over the river. One of those could ferry us just for asking... And it happened the way she predicted, probably, because it was her to ask the skiff guy for a ride.

It was an excellent day. We found a sandy glade in the Willow thicket quite close to the river, at some hundred meters from the huts. On the soft white sand, we spread the only bed cover we had, because no one except Natalie was clever enough to bring it along. When she changed into her two-piece swimsuit, she overshadowed the entire *Film a Divadlo* because along with her lush breasts and plum bottom there also was such a slender waist.

For bathing, we went to the small beach by the huts with the skiffs tied to the bank. Natalie preferred sitting in one of them but Kuba, Skully and I got as furious as in good old days on the Kandeebynno.

Then we ate sandwiches, drank lemonade and switched over to sunbathing. The bedspread on the sand had room only for two: for Natalie, as it was she who brought it, and for me, because it was I, who she was going out with.

She was lying on her back wearing wide black sunglasses, I stretched by her side on my stomach, being embarrassed with my trunks sticking out because of the boner. My sidekicks lay on the hot sand (also on their stomachs) fitting their imprudent heads onto the bedspread corners at our feet… And – all-embracing, sultry, tense, silence…

Of course, the next weekend only two of us went to that place... And again we lay side by side on the bedspread amid the silent heat. Mute and motionless hung the long leaves of the pliant young Willows around the oval glade, and we 2 as silent as them and the soundless sand, and the sun stilled in crouching over us from the sky.

My eyes firmly shut because I did not have sunglasses, but the sun, all the same, seeped in thru the blood-red fog of my dropped eyelids to turn into a black headache.

"A headache," heard I my voice, barely audible.

The red mist darkens, and I feel inexpressible delight from her palm put over my eyelids. Without opening my eyes, I find her wrist and silently pull her palm sliding over to my lips. I am so grateful to that tender soft palm that has driven away my pain and brought the inexpressible bliss. There is nothing better in the whole world.

But when she leaned on her elbow and hovered her face over mine and merged her lips with my lips, I found out that there still was something better, only that it had no name... 'Kiss'?. When you melt and dissolve in the font of the meeting lips, and you drown in their immensity but at the same time you soar… all that and a whole ocean of completely indescribable feelings... Just one syllable of four letters to pack up all that expanse wider than the limits of the world? Well, well… Anyway, the syllable was fairly employed by us that summer day.

And when we were already going to the huts for a skiff ride not to miss the local train, I stopped her amid the Willow trees to kiss once again. The parting kiss, we couldn't go on kissing farther than that. She answered the kiss with her tired lips and then, looking aside, said with a strange sadness, "Silly boy, you'll get cloyed with it."

I did not believe her...

> (...a certain German smartie, by the name of Bismarck, once flashed with another of his witticisms, "Only fools learn from their personal experience, I prefer to use the experience of others for the purpose."
>
> “I did not believe her...” But even from my personal experience, I should have learned that my sister Natasha, being younger than me for 2 years, surpassed my knowledge span and proved that repeatedly.

Yes, I'm anything but Bismarck with my distrust to others. A pinch of consolation though provides the fact that I am not a fool from his definition since I never get wiser even from my own experience.

What category then should I shove myself under?

Okay, let's not get distracted, the question is off the current topic...)

The cucumbers cloyed for good. Just out of habit and because of having nothing better to do, I would take one from the boxes, give it a couple reluctant bites, and hurl into the nearest thicket of tall grass in the grounds of the Vegetable Base.

To put it short, I also left the race and went to the ORS Office to quit and get the money I earned in that month and a half. For the first time in life, I held the sum of 50 rubles in my hands.

Was that enough for a scooter? Who should know? A talk with Mother turned those questions unnecessary:

"Sehryozha, school is starting. You need clothes. Shoes are needed both for you and your brother and sister. You know as well as I do how we're scratching along."

"Yes! I have clothes! And I told you why I was going to the Base."

"Those pants that I have painted two times? Is that your clothes? At your age, it's a shame to go about like that."

Mustang of my Dreams! Farewell! We won't rush along Peace Avenue, you and me, overtaking all those "Rigas" and "Desnas"…

No ready-made pants were bought for me. Instead, following Mother's instructions, I went to the sewing workshop near the Bus Station. The seamstress with a long pointed nose measured me and sewed trousers of dark gray broadcloth, synthetic Lavsan. A wide belt of two buttons. Wide-bottomed. Fifteen rubles.

Very soon the trousers came in handy, after Vladya brought the news that in the Central Park of Recreation they're fixin' to hold the Youth Song Contest. Those wishing to participate had to apply at the City Komsomol Committee. Yet, no one had the slightest chance because Arthur would take part in the Contest.

Arthur was a soldier Armenian from the construction battalion next to the RepBase, and Vladya was his fan. Being a right-handed guitarist, Arthur played it like a god in Vladya's estimation. He did not replace the strings, but just turned a common guitar the opposite way, with the bass strings going below and the thin ones up, and played it! In addition to that miraculous trick, Arthur also sang, no wonder Vladya idolized him and had no doubt that Arthur would win the contest. But we decided to participate, all the same. Together...Vladya and me.

As the Head of the Komsomol organization at School 13 and therefore familiar with the doors of offices in the City Komsomol Committee, I had to go there and apply for the contest as well as to know the exact time and location of the planned event. It turned out there remained just two days before the contest taking place at the Central Park dance-floor. We had no time to lose and started rehearsals...

Club Movie Projectionist, Boris Konstantinovich, switched on the light in the auditorium as well as two microphones on the stage. One of them we inserted into Vladya's guitar thru the soundhole and from the powerful loudspeakers installed on both sides of the stage, there roared such a cool sound that Boris Konstantinovich could not stand it and left. In his place, full of bubbling excitement, Glushcha scuttled in from Professions Street, where bypassing Club he got stopped in his tracks by the bewitching hubbub of that strident mayhem.

We decided to perform two numbers. First, the bass guitar part to "Chocolate Cream" from the LP disc of Polish rock-group The Chervony Guitary, to be followed then with the song from the soundtrack to "The Untraceable Avengers".

At the rehearsals everything went on in a pretty smooth way – the guitar with the mike in its body was turning out a classy rock'n'roll riff, after which the instrument was transformed into a common acoustic one to accompany Vladya's singing the song about so many a path in the field, yet the truth remained one and only. And I stood next to Vladya strumming my guitar…

Surprises cropped up at the Contest itself. In the concha of the dance-floor stage, there was just one microphone installed. One mike! Only one! So much for a starter. Besides, our duo needed to be named somehow... Another "oops". The Second Secretary of the City Komsomol Committee offered a choice: The Sun, or The Troubadours. Of the two evils, was chosen the shorter one.

Inserting a microphone into an acoustic guitar thru its soundhole is not an easy undertaking. You have to loosen a couple of thin strings to the utmost and shove the mike into the hole pulling them aside and then, naturally, tune the strings up. Now, with the rock'n'roll riff started, how could I possibly shout into the Vladya's guitar hole that we were The Sun duo? A nice x-rated pic, eh?

For the second number, the same crap, only in the opposite direction, to get the mike out. The full logistics of the situation dawned on us, when we were on the stage already, in front of the dense crowd bordered by the light of lamps around the dance-floor.

Vladya panicked, "To hell both them and their contest!" And I began to convince him that there was no way to turn back since we popped up there with our guitars. Or was it, like, we were just walking them around, sort of?

So he started the bass riff trying to jerk his guitar up closer to the microphone in which I announced that we were the vocal-instrumental duo The Sun. Then I lowered the microphone to his guitar for the crowd to hear clearly that it was rock’n’roll after all. Quite understandable that, holding the microphone, I could no longer support his bass part with my rhythm guitar.

With the second number, everything seemed to get in the groove. We both strummed our guitars, Vladya sang, I was looking above the heads of the crowd the way Raissa had taught us in the Children Sector. Yet, after singing one verse and the chorus, Vladya turned to me with rounded eyes and moaned, "I forgot the lyrics!"

The further, the merrier! May Chuba forgive me and may forgive me those present at the contest who filled that evening the dance-floor and the nearby park ally, but I took a step forward and yelled into the microphone that:

"Over the wide empty steppe

Raven soars in vain,

We'll be living for ages,

We are not raven's prey..."

By the next verse, Vladya snapped back and we finished the song off together, in a duo, just as promised…

Natalie and I did not go to the Seim anymore. We fell out, I did not get it though why she told me not to show up again.

Of course, I suffered painfully, and, of course, I was happy when in half-month my sister, aka Red-Haired, said, "I saw Grigirenchikha today, so she asks, 'Did Ogoltsoff go somewhere or what?' I says, 'No', and 'Why then does he not come?' says she. Have you quarreled or what?"

"We did not quarrel... Kiddy! you're the sun!"

The swimming season was already over, and we started to go out to the Plant Park where she showed me a secluded bench behind the clump of untrimmed bushes alongside the alley. I had walked that alley more than once but never knew about that bench, which stood as if embedded in the grotto of foliage.

There we were coming in the dusk when the rare yellowish lamps switched on in the alleys. The brightest, distant, bulb marked the window of the ticket office in the summer cinema projection booth. The projectionist Grisha Zaychenko, Konstantin Borisovich's partner, turned on the tape recorder and filled the dark park with the sound of cinema loudspeakers:

"The twilight shadowed the light of day.

Has the night come? I can't say..."

Then the ticket office bulb went out and the séance began. The bench in its cave of leaves got wrapped in the darkness. At that moment our talk was running out. She threw her head back leaning on my arm stretched out along the upper beam of the bench and the world ceased to exist. Especially so, if she had no brassier and was in the green dress with a meter-long zipper on its front...

But there are limits for anything and when, immersed into another dimension, my palm slid down her belly beneath the navel to touch the elastic band in her panties, her head on my shoulder moved discontentedly, and she issued a hmm as if she was about to wake, so I unquestioningly moved along to the upper treasures.

Then the séance ended. The bulb over the ticket office flashed on again. We waited while the handful of film-goers would pass behind the wall of bushes before we rose from the bench. Some dizzy inebriety... She must go... Dad told... No later than…

But all too soon the world waddled into the quagmire of the fall. It became cold, damp, wasted. The leaves fell down and the wet black branches could not hide the bench any longer. And who would care for sitting in the wet?

By inertia, we still went to the Plant Park, but it also became hostile. Once, in broad daylight, a mujik in his mid-thirties started to bully me. I had no chance against him. Fortunately, some guys from our school called him to have a drink behind the dance-floor, and in the meanwhile, we walked away.

The first snow fell and melted, the slush got fixed by the frost. The snow had fallen again and the winter started.

On one of the dating evenings when I unbuttoned her coat to make my way to the beloved breasts, she recoiled and said she could not allow everything to a man who, in fact, was no one to her.

Was it me that she considered no one?! After all that had been between us?!.

> (...sorting out the toppled relations, like, who’s righter, who’s wronger, is just a farewell cannonball fired with the stern cannon after the ship sailing away…)

We broke up. Fare thee well, sweetest Natalie...

> ***"Ah, tender rosebuds killed by the cruel frost..."***

~ ~ ~

End February, a year after I told Mother that I agreed to be operated on, I had to lie under the knife. A manly man should keep his word, ain't it?

Starting in the evening and all night long, my stomach ached sharply and the ambulance, called in the morning, diagnosed the appendix that had to be removed before too late. I walked to the vehicle myself but there I had to lie down in the canvas stretcher placed on the floor. Mother also wanted to go, but along Nezhyn Street, there was walking an acquaintance of hers, who was late for her work, and Mother forwent her place to the woman who she always praised as a very good legal consultant deserving all the possible respect.

In the City Hospital, despite the urgency of my diagnosis, they were too lazy to carry me on the stretcher, and I had to walk up to the second floor myself. There I changed into the blue hospital gown over a white shirt with no buttons and walked to the operation room.

They helped me to lie onto the long tall table and fixed all my extremities to it by wide sturdy belts. A white sheet was thrown over a tall frame above my face so that I could not see what they were doing to my tied up parts. A nurse, whom I also could not see, stood behind my head and asked all sorts of diverting questions. The interview was obviously intended to substitute the general anesthesia because they only syringed some local anesthetic in my stomach.

The injection took effect, I followed how they were splitting me down there and getting into my abdomen but it felt somehow in a distanced way as if they were doing it to my pants, although at the moment I had nothing on but the hospital shirt on me. A couple of times it really hurt though, so that I even groaned but the invisible nurse behind my pate began to pour a fiddle-faddle of what a gutsy patient I was, she never saw so brave, so I shut up to let them finish their business without any distracting noise. However, to a cot in the long corridor, I was taken on a gurney, after all.

Two days later they brought me a note from Vladya. He wrote that he was down in the reception hall but they did not let him pass thru, and our class would come to see me when I was allowed to get up, and I should recover as soon as possible because Chuba grew violently untamed and kept jumping at Vladya like a Mazandaran tiger.

After the surgery, they warned me to hold back coughing and avoid any straining so that the stitches keep the cut. But could you really avoid it when having such friends?

"Chuba Maza.." And, crushing the paper slip in my fist, I pushed my face into the pillow to keep back the rolling up round of laughter.

"Mandara.. tiger."

Hha! Haha!

"Ouch! It hurts!"

And even after I managed, with a lot of preservative stops, to read up the note, there was no way to ward off the jerky lines popping time and again up in my mind.

"Tiger Chuba Mazanda..."

Haha! Haha!

And tears seeped thru my eyelids squeezed so tightly. Vladya! You're worse than a tiger, O, son of a bitch!.

Ten days later I was discharged, and in one more week came to the hospital to have the stitches thread pulled from my stomach, and collect the reference releasing me from PE classes for one month…

By the by, Vladya's scrawl was more cryptic than a team of famous detectives could possibly decipher with all their methods of elementary deduction.

Half of the written essays he handed in were not even read by the Literature teacher who returned them unchecked but fiercely gashed, crisscross, in red ink. On some occasions, he even failed himself to make out heads or tails in his own graffiti and turned to me for assistance.

I was the expert arbitrator in his cryptographic disputes with Zoya Ilyinichna, "No, there is nothing wrong with the spelling, he always writes "e" that way, and this one stands for "a" by him."

"What "e"? What "a"? They're just ticks!"

"Yes, for sure, but that tick's tail is, like, a bit longer. See?"

I had a rough talk with Father when he said I should have my hair cut, for it already was as long as it's damn hard to find a name for. And because of my looks, he was summoned to the Zampolit at the RepBase.

The enterprise repaired not just helicopters, but military machines and instead of Directors or Managers they had high-rank officers and Zampolit's post was that of Deputy Commander at the RepBase. Now, that Commander simply ordered Father to stop his son from being a frightful sight in the city.

True, I did have a yan for sporting long hair like that by The Beatles. And even though the length of theirs was beyond my reach, my hair had already grown enough to touch the top of the shoulder blades when I threw my head back as far as I could to marvel my profile reflected by the mirror in the wardrobe door. At a recent CJR match, I performed the Dean Reed's hit "Jerico" hopping on the stage with a muted mike and whipping my face with my hair.

One good whipping deserved another. How would the RepBase Zampolit know that I was a son of their worker? As if few other Beatles fans were hanging out around the city. I had been told on, and no doubt about it.

However, I couldn't have words with Father for too long because I was sitting on his neck, and Zampolit threatened him with firing if I kept my hair any more…

A vigorous infection swept over our school in spring. The acutest cases of grave epidemic forms were registered in our grade which definitely turned its main locale and spiller…

Vladya and I were seated on stools at the last desk. Quite ordinary stools whose black-painted seats had oblong holes in their center to insert your hand for conveniently moving it to some different place if needed. Their commonness became a challenge… When we wiped off our foreheads the sweat from selfless toil, the black seats of our stools bore deep white scars crying out, 'THE BEATLES! THE ROLLING STONES!", and we looked around – what else could supply us a sufficient pastime?

Some unlimited naivety indeed – what could be out there to busy yourself with in a graduating class? Actually, nothing... Still and all, we gave the boredom a slip – we started writing poetry.

It was a prolific poetic eruption turned out in various forms and genres. At the break, we presented our creations to the classmates. We laughed and they were laughing too, unaware that the virus of poeticizing had already started the invisible undoing of their immune systems. Many of them began trying their hand at the production of rhymed lines. Even Chuba turned out some trifle of an epigram. But the indisputable crest-riders in that wave were sitting, sure enough, on the maimed stools at the last desk… Fortunately, the epidemic eventually died down without fatalities.

> (...if those scattered pieces of ruled paper torn off from various notebooks were put together, it could become a collection of aspirant poets. And, stashed away in bookstores stacks, it would accumulate the dust there submerged into its drowsy dreams of eager readers' hands and rising to the fame...
>
> It is highly improbable that any of my classmates would recollect that overweening epidemic. None of them would recognize even their own lines, betcha. But, after all, who cares? The final goal is nothing. The main buzz is in doing. Although, I'm still not ashamed of the lengthy elegy crafted at a lesson in Organic Chemistry:
>
> ***"The day will come for me to join the robbers***
>
> ***To earn my honest daily bread***
>
> ***I'll sleep all day and chew on dried grasshoppers***
>
> ***At night, stray walkers will I intercept..."***
>
> Then, of course, I would get killed because elegy is a traditionally sad genre and, lying in the tall grass by the highway:

“I won't grasp it with my head

by nearing Death already chilled

If so urgent was indeed

For you to have me killed?

Of wood was made my pistol, it wouldn't harm a lamb,

With gentle "Hello!" I fleeced the clients

Yet left them kopecks for a tram,

“Take ‘t easy, folks! So’s my job.”

Then soft "Adieu!" and – parting bob...”

A lot of water has flowed in the river of Varanda since then and, quoting the classic poet, handled Monkey, who worshiped banks of the Neva river:

" Some aren't there anymore, and I am far away...”

Okay. That's enough for flashing up my speckles of erudition... It's time to confess that I wasn't a stranger to swindling too. There are things you'd prefer not to remember before starting to recount them...

However, showing oneself off entirely good and irreproachable is foolish and dishonest. It's not a righteous thing, I mean. Anyway, I am not a good guy, I’m way too unsteady for that...)

So, as it was said already, that year we lost the CJR final to the prestigious School 11. In the Contest of Greetings, we schlepped on stage a dummy ship of cardboard, exactly the same as two months before us they dragged out at the Central Television CJR. And they also joked our jokes there, two months before. Both the ship and jokes were still fresh in the memory of the jury members and we were accused of blatant plagiarism in the end.

The team of School 11 came out in top hats made of blackened Whatman paper and finishing their Greeting they presented the hats to our team. I did not get my share, because their Captain left his one on the jury desk to bribe them into the right choice when taking the right decision.

After the defeat, going home without shields yet in top hats, our team members were doffing the paper head-gears at the Settlement crossroads to bye-bye each other and I felt hurt that only I didn't have the thing.

By the moment when the streetcar stop at School 13 was reached, there remained just 2 of all the team – Valya Pisanko and me. And then I insidiously asked Valya for her top hat, like, just to try it on. She credulously gave it and, clapping the paper thing onto my head, I ran away along Nezhyn Street.

I knew she wouldn't follow, she lived in Podlipnoye and had to turn in the opposite direction. Indeed, she didn't chase and only screamed behind, "Sehrguey! Give it back! It's not fair!" I knew it was not fair, but I did not return and did not give it back. Why should I?

The next morning in the lean-to which served my summer bedroom already, I was nauseated by the sight of that piece of Whatman paper blackened with gouache, some disgusting loot.

(...so, I'm assembled of divers parts and meanness enters in the aggregation...)

~ ~ ~

And so the decade was over. But it was not for me to decide whether that term was long or short, because 10 years later I became a different I from that I who 10 years before was handed to the educational system for them to format me into one more usable member in the current society. It's only fair to admit that the goals set before my didactic cultivators were, in general, achieved. I grew up from a snotty Octoberist to the Head of School Komsomol Committee. I realized that, with the universal gravitation in place, spitting into the sky was meaningless.

Even though I did not have enough of Komsomol zeal to sing "The Internationale" at All-School Komsomol Meetings along with the backup gramophone record by the Bolshoi Academic Choir, I still had no doubt that the USSR was the bulwark of peace throughout the world. (When in doubt, it's enough to recollect those small-sized red flags with the yellow prints of a dove which Soviet people used to wave at celebration demonstrations.)

Generally, we were the best in everything, and the only area in which we lagged was music. In any song by The Beatles, there were more interesting chord sequences than in the entire Soviet song production. The reason for such a dishonorable state of affairs was that all songs by us started from A-minor... If only The Beatles would not mess around with the politics. By what right did John Lennon announced that the Soviet Union was a fascist regime? It was our country who lost 20 million people killed in the war against fascism, so why couldn't The Beatles mind just music?

However, Furtseva, Minister of Culture of the USSR, was really a nasty bitch not letting them have a tour of the Union. She personally did not miss enjoying their performance behind the closed doors and then announced, "Sorry, guys, but our listener will not understand your music." Yeah, some accomplished bitch of a Minister, because they were getting ready and had already written their hit "Back to the USSR".

As for the school curriculum, I did not comprehend chemistry at all, as well as algebra with trigonometry, and several other subjects for which I did not have time enough. Yet, I was trained to distinguish landlord Famusov from its creator, poet Griboyedov. Wasn't that a sufficient base of knowledge for entering the broad road to bright brave life?

Anyway, it was too late to supplement. The time was up. The final exams were close at hand and then Graduation Party traditionally followed by the night of collective roaming of graduates who were not classmates anymore but still had to meet the dawn of their new life together.

However, all of that was just a background to the more important matter. We were preparing for the contest organized by the City Komsomol Committee. Competition in the nomination The Best Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble, aka VIA. You want a VIA? You'll get it!

All the previous winter, long before and even never suspecting they would announce the competition of VIA's, we were busy producing electric guitars as advised by instructions and blueprints in *The Radio* and *The Young Technician* magazines. For a start, we experimented in mounting piezo elements on a common acoustic guitar. As a result, the sound got amplified the way it would with a mike shoved in thru the soundhole, yet it sounded nothing like an electric guitar. Besides, the guitars for 7 rubles and 50 kopecks did not look like those in black and white pictures of different rock-groups with their hair reaching below the shoulders.

Wanna have a guitar with stylish horns? Cut its body out of three-centimeter-thick plywood. Be ready for a long hassle with the neck. The guitars which we manufactured after the drawings in the magazines for advanced technicians could not keep to key.

What is "keeping to key"? Well, if you pluck a string at the twelfth fret and then pluck the same string released, you get the same note, only over one octave. And with the necks we produced, there sounded different notes, the guitars did not keep to key; that's what it meant.

The upshot was we had to fall back on using the necks of common guitars which kept to key alright. Yet, the headstock of a common guitar with its slots for strings looked ridiculous on an electric guitar, like a saddle atop a cow. To replace the headstock in the neck, you have to saw it out and substitute with a homemade one having no slots and with all six or four tuning pegs in one row.

Father soldered the electrical rigging of guitars following the schemes printed in the magazines. Besides, he brought from the RepBase shielded cable enclosed by braided metal strands for the connection of a guitar to the amplifier. Without such a cable, electric guitars issued a godawful wail miles away from any music.

All the testing was carried out in our *khutta*, with the product in progress connected to the ancient radio receiver because Father said if it worked on that junk then with a normal amplifier would make it sound topnotch.

The pickups became a major headache. A pickup is a tiny box installed under the strings with an individual coil for each of them. One coil comprised six hundred spirals of hair-breadth copper

wire wound by hand, now it remains only to multiply them by the number of strings to equip the guitar with a pickup...

Eventually, everything got assembled. The radio receiver shakes its case bursting from steely thundering cords and popular guitar riffs, drowning Mother's yells of protestation from the kitchen. Wow! We're delighted. The bomb! Father looks pleased too...

Now you can take everything apart, level the plywood of guitar body with sandpaper, putty it and tenaciously polish again, this time with finer sandpaper before spraying the body with paint (you'll choose red, betcha), then re-assemble your shiny new electric guitar. Enjoy!.

Thus we got all the right, as well as equipment, to apply for participation in the contest organized by the City Komsomol Committee who kept pace with the contemporary life demands. All in all, there were exactly 2 competitors vying for the laurels of the Konotop's best:

1) VIA "The Kristall" by the House of Culture named after Lunacharsky (aka Loony);

2) VIA "The Orpheuses" by the Club of the Konotop Engine and Car Repairing Plant (aka the KahPehVehRrZeh Club).

The Loony guys were in the business for years. They had an electric organ played by Sasha Basha, who had graduated from the Music School in the piano class. He was not only the leader of The Kristall but also the Captain of the CJR team from the prestigious School 11 who beat us that year.

Besides participation in the concerts at Loony, they were also "playing trash", that is providing live music at weddings, birthdays and all sorts of parties with their 1 organ, 2 guitars, and the drum set. On the opposite side, there were 4 of us. We didn't know a damn thing about the music theory (except for Chuba who had attended the Music School for 4 years in the class of button-accordion) , but we were backed by Club, the unalienable part of the Settlement.

While our *khutta* served the base for technical empowering of The Orpheuses, Club provided means for our musical education. (Once again leaving aside Chuba and his button-accordion which let him easily master the bass guitar parts, because they, generally, coincide with those played by the musician with his left hand in the bass section of the accordion.)

That's why, the concert of Classical Guitar in Club, advertised by a modest poster about the classical guitar performer Zverev from the Kiev Philharmonic, was attended by only two Orpheuses – Vladya and me because Skully did not feel like attending as long as he was the drummer at our VIA, not a guitar-player…

The lobby of Club was unusually crowded, and so was the landing at the auditorium entrance, young guys for the most part. Who would have thought that the Settlement youth were so much fond of the guitar classics, eh?

So, we stood up there in the crowd when from below, along the wide steps of the stair as well as from among the dudes around us, there rose the rustle of the low-voiced announcement to each other, like a gust of wind rushing in front of the thunderstorm: "Wafflisters! Wafflisters are coming!"

From the first floor, 2 girls were ascending the wide stairs. On their reaching the stairhead, the stares of all present were riveted to them in tense deafening silence. I was struck with the purity of the milk-white skin in the girls' faces. Encapsulated with the wall of goggling silence, they turned right, to the mirrored gym of the Ballet Studio where that evening the seminarians from GPTU-4 had their party…

And we, Vladya and I, split from the crowd on the landing and turned to the left, to join a handful of those who attended the concert of the Guitarist Laureate in his classic three-piece black suit and thick-lensed black-rimmed glasses.

A couple of front rows were more than enough to accommodate the listeners who were seated giving a wide berth to each other. He sat above us in a chair at the edge of the feebly illuminated stage, announced the music pieces and then played them on his acoustic guitar. But that was more than what we considered guitar playing! Something unimaginable! Unattainable…

After the concert, Vladya and I knocked on the door of the room in the first floor, where he was folding his black suit to pack it into the hard black case of his guitar. We introduced ourselves as guys willing to learn the guitar playing. What's to be done? How to begin?

And he gave us a free consultation. He took out his instrument from under the suit in his case and showed some tricky picks. Then he packed everything back and went to the Station to go elsewhere thru the dark of night. Yet, before leaving the room, he advised us to get some Polish music magazines where they were printing a lot of music with tablature above the lyrics. However, at the newsstands of Konotop, they never heard of such magazines…

After applying for the VIA contest, we came to the Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich. We made it clear that for holding aloft the honor of Club at the City Contest we wanted a mere trifle, really, those couple of black speakers from the portable movie projector, together with their amplifier, because we had no place for rehearsals, nor a single item of the drum set.

Flaring his already flushed face under the crisp curls of a natural merchant, Pavel Mitrofanovich blared out that for the guys from the Settlement, Club would do all and everything and then everything and all over again. That is the meaning of slotting negotiations in the appropriate moment of a person's daily schedule.

Director ordered Club House Manager, Stepan, to pass us the room of the Variety Ensemble until after the contest. The Ensemble musicians led by their Head, Aksyonov, moved their instruments from the room, including the double bass and saxophone, to an unknown destination. For an indefinite interval, Aksyonov stopped appearing in Club at all. In the room, there remained only a giant desk, a piano and "the kitchen"—a drum set made up of a kicker, a snare, a hat, and two tom-toms under a wide crash. The clickety-clak, taps, dubs, bangs, clangs of the kitchen filled

the room and the outside corridor for hours because Skully was practicing to give out the rock beat with all of his hands and feet.

The technique of beating the beat was shown to him by Anatoly Melai, a Settlement dude recently demobilized from the army who, before he was drafted, played the horn at the Variety Ensemble. Besides, he showed us the chords to "The Yellow River" by the rock group Christie. That song topped most of the European music charts then. We knew about the fact from the station "The Radio-Sweden" who were broadcasting in Russian one hour a week, on Sundays, and the ours did not block it with the usual static noise because they talked exclusively about rock music omitting any anti-Soviet propaganda.

Anatoly even knew the Russian adaptation of the lyrics in "The Yellow River":

"We roamed at the Yellow River

The flowers blossomed all 'round us

By the river of my dream –

Alloverida!"

And then there followed the chorus which oddly enough avoided rendering into Russian:

"Alloverida! Alloverida!

Yuza mom-ma! Yuza mom-ma!"

We started to rehearse it as the number for the contest. At some point, it dawned on me that if the song was called "The Yellow River" then the chorus also should sound "Yellow River!" but not like that fuzzy "Alloverida". So, it was not in vain that Alla Iosifovna at her English classes was driving it home to me that "London is the capital of Great Britain". Anatoly peevishly wrinkled his nose but had no trumps to ward off my stock of knowledge. To reward my linguistic feat, Chuba let me sing the backup in the chorus:

"Yellow River! Yellow River!

is in my mind and in my eyes."

That immensely inspired me, because in our VIA I had the very necessary but so inconspicuous role of the rhythm guitarist.

For the second number, we chose "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones. We knew the chords to the song and even its true title, but we did not know the lyrics and just were using dummy "doo-wop" like some seasoned scat singers:

"Doo-wop doo-wop doo-wop doo-wop

Doo-wop doo-wop pá-ba-baá

Yet, knowing the name, you could guess what the song was about and if you know the lines meter then – full ahead!

"Black clouds towered in the sky over the city

The drops of falling rain are black as coal tar

No stars reflected in the puddles: nor big, nor bitty

Black fog has stolen them and hidden way too far..."

(.. in the film "The Devil's Advocate" with Al Pacino as Prince of Dark this song sounds at the concluding credits, the original, of course. But at that time it was too early for Hollywood to shoot that movie. And, by the by, performing "The Yellow River" in Russian, our garage VIA had outstripped The Jolly Guys of Alexander Booynov who released it a couple of years later, substituting Karlsson-on-the-Roof for the original river:

"Now we hear,

Now we hear,

The motor buzz,

The cheerful buzz.

High in the air

Straight from the roof

Our dear friend

Is flying to us..."

Thus a love song was mutated into the RepBase anthem...)

Before the VIA competition, we rehearsed for days on end leaving Club only to have a midday meal at the pavilion "Meeting" by the Station square where we ate dumplings, flushed them down with gulps of beer from a bottle of Zhigulyovsky shared between the 4 of us and considered ourselves cool dudes who could play rock.

Precisely one day before the contest, our rivals—VIA "The Kristall" from Loony—dealt us a preemptive blow. They came to our school to play the trash at the graduation party of our class. Earlier, we offered the school management our music services for the pram dance free of charge,

however, the proposal was turned down and they hired The Kristall instead. In our native school, we did not pass for musicians! Like prophets never heeded in their native lands, indeed...

Of course, The Kristall had a well-established reputation. Sasha Basha, educated at the piano class of Music School, played his organ very competently – both "seven-forty", and waltz, and rock'n'roll, but it, still, hurt.

The revenge took place at the contest because we had hidden reserves. Firstly, Pavel Mitrofanovich let us grab for the occasion the 50-watt amp. And secondly, we carried the day even before making any music, our looks when appearing on the stage showed at once who were predestined winners.

Okay, suppose you've got an electric organ and music education plus a team of musicians trained at "playing trash", but who would care a damn about all that crap the moment when:

"...And now in this cozy Central Park Summer Cinema, we invite on stage the vocal-instrumental ensemble... The Orpheuses!!."

At which moment, there came out four dudes with three (!) horned (!!) guitars!!!

And, on top of everything else, each of them, all the 4 rigged...

...IN WHITE PANTS!!!..

Oh, my! There is no way to bring over the meaning of white pants in Konotop of 1971, kinda divine trappings and you can’t put it any clearer because our triumph came to pass before the world-wide rise of the denim civilization.

Where had so snazzy outfit come from? In Department Store opposite Main Post, they were selling the so-called "canvas for household needs", 1 ruble 20 kopecks a meter. After the very first wash, the fabric turned into gray saggy burlap, however, we appeared on stage in pants in their pristinely virgin, unwashed, state.

Mother made them—all the four—with her sewing machine, two days before the performance. The ongoing pants fashion of the day rejected the wide waist belt in favor of no belt at all, the stylish dude's pants then started at the middle of the hips. One meter and ten centimeters of "canvas" were more than enough for a pair of trousers.

The only bad news was that I screwed up my part in the "Yellow River" vocals.

During the rehearsals, Chuba kept frowning at my third in the chorus backup, and in the knock-up chant before going on stage in the Central Park's Summer Cinema he just grabbed his head in despair. So at the moment when we had to yell together into a single microphone, "Yellow River! Yellow River!" I only opened my mouth without producing any sound at all. It was the same trick as singing "The Internationale" at the All-School Komsomol meetings or in the make-believe performing of "Jericho" at a CJR game.

Chuba made round eyes on the other side of the mike because I left him without the third, to no avail though. The Orpheuses convincingly carried the day but on my vocal career, there was put the final cross. Still and all, we did it!.

~ ~ ~

You strain yourself, you pine away in exhausting efforts to reach your goal and after you've done it triumphantly all there remains for you is just living on… Probably, that's the hardest part.

"Where to sail?" poetically described such situation Pushkin, and Chernishevsky paraphrased the question in the artless prose, "What's to be done?"

"That is all,

Say "bye!" to dreams

Live your life

the way it seems

Right to you.

Find your answers,

Find your ways,

Find your path to happiness.

Do it, do!"

(music by V. Sakoon, lyrics by S. Ogoltsoff)

I ventured to look for happiness at the Kiev State University named after T. Shevchenko, taking my school certificate to the Department of English Language there. Unlimited arrogance it was, considering the extent of my knowledge which encompassed a couple of grammar tables memorized from the English textbook for the 8th grade. However, audacity calls for reward and all the ride from Konotop to Kiev (4 hours by a local train) I spent on a seat next to Irina Kondratenko, the most good-looking girl among my ex-classmates. The gorgeous black eyes and long black hair made her so beautiful that I would never dare approach the girl, what's the use to be unreasonable? And suddenly—lo!—4 hours of riding side by side filled with an eager conversation.

Irina also was going to Kiev to become a student somewhere while living at some relatives of hers and, being already acquainted with the city, she advised me by which streetcar to go from the station square to the University… The ceilings at the University were unusually high to drive

it home to the folks it was the right place for getting higher education. At the dean's office, I swapped my certificate of secondary education and the reference about my excellent state of health for the address of a student hostel in about one hour's ride by a trolleybus.

The hostel manager, or maybe she was just a dormitory attendant in charge of forking out the bed linen in exchange for my passport, turned out an unmistakable racist and didn't care about hiding her ugly inclinations. I deducted it when 2 young Vietnamese entered her office (or the stockroom), immediately following me and asked her for an oilcloth to cover the table in their room. Her crisp retort was, "No oidcloth for you! You're an oidcloth yourself! Get out of here!"

They timidly left, sad and puny against the background of that robust Ukrainian racist. I wondered silently if she was able to pronounce "oilcloth" in Vietnamese.

However, jumping to conclusions when unaware of all the concurrent circumstances might result in faulty evaluation. That whole scene could very easily have nothing to do with racism. There was no 100 percent guarantee that them those bitchy Vietnamese were not asking for the fifth oilcloth on the same day, or else that it wasn't the fifth pair of Vietnamese demanding an oilcloth from the overworked Ukrainian woman utterly tired of their looking so much alike…

One of my roommates also was an applicant for the English Department, only he had already served in the army. The next day, we went to the University together to attend a pre-examination lecture where he chattered with the lecturer so fluently that I felt myself like at that Regional Physics Olympiad, where all of them understood each other and only I was cutting an odd dolt around.

After the lecture, I went to the dean's office and took back my matriculation papers. I do not remember what exactly lie I told them because it was not easy to confess that I freaked out and surrendered without even trying. On the way to the hostel to collect my passport, there gushed such a rain that at times the trolley had to swim from one stop to another. The rain to wash away the slightest traces... The four-hour trip by the local train to Konotop was spent in desolate silence... No cute chat-companions for scurvy cowards…

In Konotop, any knotty question gets resolved on the fly. Whereto? Of course, same place with the rest of your gaggle. Join the crowd, mate.

Skully was already a third-year student at the Railway Transportation College, above the Under-Overpass tunnel. Vladya and Chuba had submitted their papers for admittance to the same institution. So the question "whereto?" was solved before me, I could only matriculate to the Konotop Railway Transportation College. Even Anatoly Melai was there embracing some vague position of a laboratory assistant, but with the academic year not started yet he was just walking the corridors in blue overalls engaged in wiring, when not busy singing.

As it turned out, Anatoly was an avid fan of The Pesnyary VIA who had recently performed "The Dark Night" in the Kremlin Hall. Imagine the picture, eh? All the top geezers from the Political Bureau of the Central Committee in the first row – Brezhnev, Suslov...er...who

else?...Podgorny...And the dudes spread it out in full with the unleashed guitar reverberation!... Plus the vocals, of course! All their numbers are in no less than four-part harmony:

"The dark night's between

Me and you, my beloved one..."

And Anatoly, throwing up his face in the pockmarks left by gone acne, filled the empty corridor with echoes of one or another from those harmony parts. And why not? It's summer and no classes around, even the admittance exams hadn't started yet and, the main factor, he's in his overalls.

"When I go to date you

My bast-shoes keep creaking!."

He promised to put in a word for The Orpheuses applicants, however, only one-third of us was admitted—Chuba and Vladya fell thru and went to work at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant…

Mid-August we made a proposal to the Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich, which he could not refuse—we would play dances in the Plant Park. For free.

Each of the three parks in the city of Konotop—the Central, the Loony, and the Plant Park—was furnished with a dance-floor. Those dance-floors presented complete replicas of each other: the spherical concha over the band stage abutted the wide circle of concrete guarded by the two-meter tall grating of iron pipes which enclosure had the narrow entrance gate (diametrically opposite the stage) made of the same pipes. Even the paint coat of the gratings was the same gray silver. The only difference was that the paint on the pipes in the Central Park of Recreation had not peeled off so dismally as by two others.

Mother remembered that as a young girl, she attended the Plant Park dance-floor because in summertime there played a brass band. Later, everything ground to a halt and, in the warm season, the young Konotopers began to walk in circles (instead of waltzing) along the alleys in Peace Square shuffling thru the layers of spat out black seeds husk. A circle after a circle...

But then there came that fateful August Sunday to wake the Plant Park's dance-floor up from the benumbed dormancy. With a clang, collapsed the fetters secured by the rusty iron padlock, and on we hauled across the concrete circle the rubber-wheeled handcart towards the concha-roofed stage.

Normally, that handcart was used by the projectionists for transportation of the cylindrical tin boxes with film reels from Club to the open-air cinema in the Plant Park. However, on that historic Sunday, it bore the tall pile of the cuboid boxes of amps and loudspeakers, like, angular haystack propped by upholding hands.

We started to install and assemble the equipment, switching on, plugging in, checking the guitars with a bang of a chord or 2, picking popular riff over the strings.

A crisp echo bounced back from the squalid two-story apartment block right outside the meter-tall park fence. Along with the echo, there came racing a brood of local small kids and, not daring enter the open gate, bunched up in the alley beyond the palisade of iron pipes.

Now Skully, pompous and self-important, puts his drum-set "kitchen" up, dubs the kick drum with the pedal beater, chinks the hat, clangs the crash.

The ultimate check of the microphone, "One... One-two... One..."

With the dry clicking of sticks against each other, Skully sets the tempo.

One, two. One-two-three-four! Off we go!!

That's how the change of epochs was coming to pass in a singled-out Konotop park...

With the narrow gate unguarded for so long, the kids began to cautiously penetrate into the concrete circle of the dance-floor, yet keeping, just in case, close to the grating except for a couple of neglected toddlers cut loose to frisk happily hither-thither.

Three girls walked in to get seated in a short line on a backless bench by the fence... A young pair entered slowly, seems, belated to occupy the special bench in the grotto of bushes... Another hesitant couple... Welcome, there are lots of benches here...

The groundbreaking night saw no dancing; we, like, played to please ourselves. Then we shipped the equipment and instruments to the summer cinema ticket office on the first floor in the projectionist's booth.

Everything repeated itself on Wednesday. Yes! On Wednesday! We scheduled dances thrice a week: Sunday, Wednesday, and Saturday.

On Saturday, a half-hour before we started, some unusual stir in the air was felt in the Plant Park alleys suddenly filled by too many people sauntering along, to and fro. We decided to wait no longer and climbed on the stage when Vitya Batrak, handled Slave, entered the wide circle of the dance-floor followed by his retinue from Peace Square guys.

The abundant curls of chestnut color poured over the shoulders of his long-sleeved silk shirt the color of the Jolly Roger. The collar, following the suit of the unbuttoned, loosely sweeping cuffs, disclosed his chest in a generous cleavage down to the solar plexus.

When in the center of the dance-floor, Slave kicked up a picturesque discussion with his followers about the wristwatch he wore. The wide strap of artificial leather got unfastened, the watch tossed up in the air, high and fair, to clatter back against the concrete floor. The disputants encircled and craned over —ticking or what?

Meanwhile, a stream of young people of both sexes began to flow in bypassing the pack of clockwork experts. That's it! The city believed that in the Plant Park they did play dances!

On Sunday everyone danced. In circles, of course. A circle of ten to fifteen dancers sprang up around two or three satchels placed on the concrete floor. Each circle danced in the endemic style of their own… The band stage served a good viewing point. In the circle on the left, they were busily twisting while in the one closer to the concha, the dancers imitated speed skating contest by shuffling their feet in gradual circles over the cemented floor with their hands clasped on their backs. And over there, near the gate, the guys were still happy with the ol' good "seb'n-forty". At times, from one or another dancing circle there sounded a probing, on-the-sly scream...

Next Saturday, auntie Shura, the Controller in her eternal helmet-kerchief, pops up at the entrance to the dance-floor directing all who approached the gate after tickets, 50 kopecks apiece.

Vladya and I come up to auntie Shura, we burn with rightful rage. What the heck! These dances for free! Free dances!

Auntie Shura remains indifferently calm, she has Director's order.

Vladya, glowing in the twilight with his white short-sleeved turtleneck, yells to the nearing folks not to listen to her and come in because the dances for free! Free dances!

No one listens to him, they sheepishly plod on towards the summer cinema ticket office. Be like everyone else…

If for a couple of decades you keep folks without even a brass band around, they would readily put down 50 kopecks for a slip of blank movie-ticket with the "price 35 kop." printed black on blue.

After the dances, when we brought the equipment back to the narrow ticket office, the cashier shared that she had sold 500 tickets that night. The following day Pavel Mitrofanovich ordered to remove all the benches from the dance-floor to cram more people inside. The merchant genes in his DNA surpassed all my guesses.

What did we play? Basically, instrumental pieces like in that LP disc by The Singing Guitars plus the songs we had prepared for the contest, however, without my third already.

At times, at the insistent request of the public, Quak would come up to the microphone to break all hell loose by "Shyzgara". He looked great with that long blonde hair of his and small mustache of albino color. It's only that he made people wheedle him for so long, but then: "Shyzgara!"

And the bursting, eager response, the wild wail from several hundred throats:

"Vaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!"

(...you should have heard this song. Yes, you had, and more than once for sure, only without the lyrics. The TV folks like to use it as background soundtrack when advertising all kinds of female lingerie and stuff.

And at that time a rock-group from Holland, The Shocking Blue, toured the globe with practically just that one song of theirs – "Venus" which made them “the group of the year”, surprising all the music critics as well as the band themselves.

And their vocalist, of course, sang:

" She's a goddess!”

Yet, Quak's "oidclothy" interpretation did not prevent anybody from being carried away and shrieking at the top of their lungs:

"Vaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!"

I mean to say that true, sublime, work of art finds its way to the masses and ignites sincere response in spite of any accent.

Shyzgara!!!..)

And the masses grew more and more dense. When in the middle of the dances we announced a short break, it took a while to push thru the crowd and get out to a side alley towards the long booth of whitewashed planks, marked with "M" and "F" at its ends.

There was no time to idle because back on the stage Chuba was already dubbing random riffs by his bass guitar to set a-quaking the front of the huge loudspeaker borrowed from the summer cinema. Skully's current girlfriends with the girlfriends of theirs used the nook behind that loudspeaker for stacking their shoulder bags.

Yes, it was Skully who had the most frantic success among the girls in The Orpheuses bohemian milieu. (It's inappropriate to use 'groupies' when talking of VIA’s, right?)

What do girls find in all those drummers, eh? I, for example, had only one time seen home a certain blonde Irina. It's hard to say who of us cooled down quicker – she, having to wait after the dances while The Orpheuses were hauling all the equipment to the summer cinema ticket office, or I because of the alarming fact that she lived in the dangerous neighborhood of Zagrebelya.

Later on, she was picked up by Anatoly Melai who was smart enough to escort her by a taxi. Getting out of a car pulled up by her gate, Anatoly would ask the driver, "Chief, when the meter ticks up to one ruble, gimme a honk, eh?"

I know not if the driver, after the stipulated honk, got amused watching the Melai's trot while fumbling with his fly or Anatoly accurately set his temporal limits. Anyway, Zagrebelya still remained dire straits for those in love.

In another development, I was approached by Kolya Pevriy. When at school, he kept bully-ragging me so that I even started to figure out for how long I still had to suffer before he'd leave after the eighth grade and enroll the Seminary. And now he came up with full respect and asked to step out from the dance-floor to his classmate Valya, who also was a year older than me. She was going somewhere to be operated from an inborn heart defect and wanted to talk to me.

I went out at the half-time break, stopped by her side in the dark alley. We both were silent, she kept sighing, and then the break was over. Some romantic date...

How did we play? That question I can answer with just one word:

LOUD!

Oh, hapless tenants of the two-story apartment block right over the Plant Park fence!.

> (...in the beginning of the third millennium, the King of Spain asked Jews to forgive that 500 years ago the great-grandpas of their great-grandpas of their great-grandpas were deported from the land of Spain. Better late than never...
>
> Forgive us, O, woeful-tenants, for making you deaf three times a week!
>
> Never again we'll be so inhumanely beastly!.)

~ ~ ~

However, the Club life didn't get fixed to the dance-floor alone. The Head of Variety Ensemble, fair-haired saxophonist Aksyonov, popped up again and integrated us into his band to accompany their vocalist Zhanna Parasyuk at concerts by the Plant Amateur Activities.

One of the rehearsals was held on the stage of open-air cinema in the Park with the white screen pulled aside because the season of summertime cinema was at its end. We worked before the empty benches in the auditorium enclosure performing another number in the inescapable A-minor:

> ***"Icy ceiling, creaky door –***
>
> ***In the Winter-Mommy's hut..."***

The dusk was thickening outside and in the auditorium, when thru the tunnel of entrance under the projectionists' booth there appeared a couple of girls escorted by a guy, too young though to be a boyfriend.

I thought that, seeing empty benches all around, they'd turn about and leave at once but, no, they slowly proceeded and got seated somewhere in the fifth row. Well, the audience of 3 is also an audience. One of the girls had long dark hair, but she was fat. The other was what you'd need for a girlfriend in her mini-skirt and checkered waistcoat. Her hair, even though short, was wavy and yellow, so you at a glance could see it's dyed.

And then, quite so composedly, without a slightest attempt at concealing, she took a cigarette pack from out her waistcoat and lit one up. Skully's girlfriends, before smoking, always looked back and all around to check that no one would sight them smoking.

Anyway, they were sitting down there and we starting another take, when the girl with the cigarette turned to her fat girlfriend and spoke up. Of course, I couldn't hear that it was me she pointed out to her chum, "This one will be mine. Wanna bet?"

With the rehearsal over, the youngster approached me on the stage, "That girl over there wanna have a word with you."

In a minute I was by their side in the fifth row. Olga, Sveta – oh, how mighty nice! And in a half-hour, I was escorting both girls home. Not far at all, some two hundred meters from the Plant Park, the third back-alley in Budyonny Street when going towards the Swamp.

In fact, I wasn't the only escort because Skully and Quak also plodded along, which was not quite fitting into the picture – she got only one girlfriend about her which those 2 obviously outnumbered. Who's escorting whom?

After the turn into the back-alley, Sveta giggled her parting "bye!" and slipped away into her *khutta's* yard. Olga and I went on to the wicket of the next one, where she said she lived. But Skully and Quak stuck fast and tagged on along, inserting their silly cues in our conversation. And only when I and Olga started kissing, they realized there was no making-hay for them at all. So, they crossed to the opposite fence in the alley, urinated on it under the lamppost (some bohemian milieu, dammit!) and left with a flea in their ear. As if they couldn't keep in check their nature call until back on Budyonny Street. How come Quak was at the rehearsal? Very simple, the vocalist Zhanna Parasyuk was his one and only sister…

The Amateur Activity concerts were staged not only in Club. Sometimes, they were taken to different villages in the Konotop District traveling there by a small bus of PAZ make. It was for one of such concerts that we rehearsed that icy ceiling with the creaking door in A-minor.

Since the PAZ bus was not of rubber, you couldn't take along any amplifying equipment, neither was there any room for the young snowflakes in their tutus bred by the Ballet Studio. Just one Ukrainian Hopuck and one Moldovan Jock danced to the button-accordion of Ayeeda were quite enough for such a touring concert. Then she handed the instrument over to Chuba for playing his part in the Variety Ensemble band.

My role in the Ensemble was that of a rhythm guitarist with a common acoustic guitar. Vladya remained outside Variety Ensemble because Aksyonov, with his saxophone, felt no need for

assimilating a solo-guitar. As for Skully, he was irreplaceable, only his "kitchen" got minimized to the skeleton composition of the snare-and-hat to pat his sticks upon.

The universally recognized cream of the concert program was, certainly, Murashkovsky singing songs and telling *humoreskas*. Those rhymed stories about "me and my koom", were his specialty. About how “I”, together with the koom, aka a sister-in-law's husband, smashed the football goal clean away with koom's head or, riding a motorcycle, collided with a kolkhoz bull who threw us over an Oak-tree just for free... Simple rhyme, solid wit. The audience liked it – they laughed and clapped.

And then on the stage again appeared Zhanna the Singer and we – her band. Skully sat the tempo, we started and I suddenly felt that the guitar strings under my fingers were loosened to the utmost. Aksyonov had tempered with them, no doubt, during a *humoreska* or, maybe, while they danced Hopuck, to have a hearty laugh. Some stupid thick-cheeked joker.

Well, so Chuba and Skully were making up for chords and rhythm and I, like scenery alive, was striking chords careful not to let them sound – as if I was playing an odd *klepka*…

In the end of the concert, Murashkovsky traditionally burst out his main "bomb" – the *humoreska* about Adoptee and his Mother-in-Law.

> (...in those days the word "mother-in-law", aka "teshcha", was the most magical incantation among stand-up comedians. It was enough for a man on the stage to pronounce "teshcha!" and the audience laughed and laughed.
>
> Nowadays, the population grew much more sophisticated, spoiled by the elaborate cultivated humor so that an actor in the comic genre must inhale deeply and screech at the top of their lungs into the microphone – "shit!" for the audience to get it that it’s time to laugh...
>
> Okay, we'd better get back to the concert at a village club in the early seventies of the XX-th century...)

Issuing torrid screams, Murashkovsky dashed from the entrance thru the entire small hall towards the stage. The case of button-accordion in his hands served a make-believe suitcase with personal belongings. After climbing the stage, he started the first-person *humoreska* on bitter miseries in the life of Adoptee.

His wife together with her Mom, his *teshcha*, had turned him in for the militia to prevent his going on a binge. While locked up, he dedicated all of the standard 15-day stretch in the custody to working out a careful plan for revenge and now, on his return from behind the bars to the place of residence, he casually broke the news about the barrel with pickled cucumbers in the earth cellar-pit going to pieces...

(*The audience enliven and start to giggle.*)

The worried wife and *teshcha* race down the ladder into the earth-cellar and Adoptee from above the ladder top recites the biblical principle of "eye for an eye", announces his verdict for their wrong-doings—fifteen days of incarceration—and slams the cellar-pit lid shut.

(*The hall drowns in the jubilant glee.*)

Every other day Adoptee drops to the captives packages on a string, like humanitarian relief with certain food items, as a dietary addition to the vegetables stored down there.

(*Decibels of the thundering guffaw reach the neighboring villages. The spectators with a particularly vivid imagination can't laugh anymore – they simply jerk their heads with their mouths convulsively open, their squinted eyes drip tears which they have nothing to wipe with because their hands, balled into fists, keep knocking against the back of the seat in the row in front of them*.)

Four days later, the militia, called by some of the neighbor-villagers, come to set the captives free, and Adoptee gets another stretch of 15 days in confinement.

(*"Boo-ha-ha" in the audience acquire resemblance to a collective fit.*)

Murashkovsky throws at them the concluding lines, like a bullfighter dealing the final stab to the animal.

> "Okay, I'm leaving.
>
> You'll never find another one like me.
>
> I won't even burn your *khutta* down, which I could do!"

Normally, to these words, the audience reacted with a farewell burst of laughter capable of blowing the doors and windows out together with their frames. Murashkovsky prepared for a parting bow to the general ovation and — Dead silence. Not a sound.

All froze like exhibits in the Madam Tussaud's Theater of Wax Figures. Only from somewhere in the seventeenth row there comes a tiny plop of a tear giggled out just a moment before… Then the seat backs begin to creak uneasily. The village council chairman cautiously steps up onto the stage with a crumpled word of gratitude for the concert. The audience disperse in mute despondency. Behind the scenes Aksyonov and Skully pinion Murashkovsky gone to pieces in a heavy fit of hysterics, no one knows how to appease him…

In record time, the instruments and costumes are shoved into the bus. All got seated in the Club Manager office for the traditional treat of gratitude to the touring actors: bread, lard, cucumbers, hooch. After the first glass, the village council chairman brings an awkward apology to Murashkovsky, "Well, here... er...in our village three *khuttas* were burnt down...in just a month...they still can’t find who..."

The Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich, blushing more and more in his plump face, keeps vigilant control over the bus driver and after the man gulps his third glass—"to smooth the road"—we are good to start into the night.

At that stage in my life the taste of hooch was still making me wince, so a couple of gulps, snacked with bread and lard, got worn away quickly. I watched the impenetrable night rushing by behind the window glass.

The driver applied his whole soul to press the gas pedal right into the floor. We flew; we shot along the soft dirt roads of the district. The headlights snatched from the dense darkness occasional trunks and branches of the roadside trees. At times a small village *khuttas* scudded by… A guy and a girl standing by a *khutta* fence… seeing her home...

They looked back at the flying bus. Perhaps they thought, "The folks manage to enjoy their lives, they live in the city". They envied me.

Strange as it was, but I envy them… seeing her home... I also want that… in the warmly dark Ukrainian night...

But I have Olga, and in the back-alley where she lives, it's the same night, yet I still envy that guy… dreadfully odd…

~ ~ ~

Olga was superbly good at kissing and liked it too, not for nothing she had so sensual lips. The bitter taste of burnt tobacco on her breath did not distract me overly much. Besides, standing by her *khutta's* wicket, the very next time I saw her home, she shared a cigarette to me. I tried with cautious apprehension, yet it brought no bummer and I began to smoke even without Olga around.

The *khutta*, which I escorted her to, was dwelt by Olga's aunt by whom she stayed that summer on her visit from Theodosia in the Crimea, where also lived her mother and elder sister. As for her father, he died in an accident driving a tractor when she was twelve years old. Olga loved him so much that sometimes she went to the cemetery in the dead of night to cry by the openwork monument welded of rebar rods with the tablet "Abram Kosmenko" fixed to it. Some name, eh? But he wasn't a Jew, just so was his name.

Her mother found a stepfather for her and her sister, no ZAGS registration though. He's a musician, knocking drums. One time, Olga lay on the couch with the temperature watching TV. He got seated next to her feet and covered his lap with the end of her blanket. Her mother saw it and raised some hell of yelling...

Then she went in for athletics, one hundred meter dash. The coach said she had a good physique for that sport. And their group even went for a competition in the regional center, Simferopol City. Before the dash, the coach made everyone eat a whole lemon, not a pinch of sugar to sprinkle it. He said, "It gets straight to the blood!"

Thus, between the kisses, we were getting to know each other more closely…

After that touring concert, Skully, Vladya and I went to the Seim for an overnight stay. By the evening local train, Skully and I got there bringing with us a large vinyl bag which Father had fetched from the RepBase. Such bags came there as wrapping for certain helicopter spare parts. The big translucent bag could easily do for a three-man tent. We also brought a guitar with us and then Vladya arrived by his scooter "Riga-4" loaded with the dinner.

On a sandy spit overgrown with young supple Willows, we put the bag-tent up. It was getting dark and we built a fire to share a bottle of wine by its light and the slathers of grub brought by Vladya, which seemed too much for a snack and was lavishly scattered around, however, no one cared because in the morning Vladya had to ride to Konotop after more chow...

He began to give out guitar riffs from popular hits. Above the placid water, the guitar sounds wafted mighty great, so clear, so full and… *nyshtyak*, in a word, it sounded out there... One fisherman in his boat anchored in the middle of the river liked it and asked to cut more. But when we roared "Shyzgara!" another night catcher from afar—near the other bank—began to curse us for scaring off his fish.

Skully advised not to mess around with him, the geezer could go and call more mujiks from the huts. The fire burnt out and we crawled under the vinyl roof…

At dawn, I woke up from water dripping into my face. Vinyl is absolutely water- and air-tight. The night-chilled walls kept our breathing inside turning it into water droplets—the condensate, at school they did not teach us of such things. So we met the morning cold and hungry. I hardly managed to wheedle Vladya to give me his "Riga-4" for riding after some eats instead of him...

Yes, motors are the real thing, you don't have to pedal or pull anything, the only effort is twisting the throttle handle and steering... I drove into the city mapping the routes in my mind: first – home, then to the Skully's *khutta* and to the Vladya's to collect available victuals, and then the ride back to the river.

"Plans on paper looked just fine

Yet, they'd missed out the ravine..."

Entering the left turn between the Station and Loony Park I heard my name called out loud. Over the Station square, Olga was dashing in her red mini-skirt. The coach was right – that's some physique!. I throttled down and let the scooter come to a stop...

She ran up with not a whiff of panting and let me have it – it's three days since I'd disappeared no one knew where and if I did not want going out with her I didn't have to she didn't care because yesterday she got a telegram from her mother inviting for a telephone talk with Theodosia and she said that's enough for staying and she had to go back in two days but I didn't care I rushed to the Seim with my fucking friends who were more dear to me than her and she was just a fool to

think she had found someone she could trust and if I needed her the slightest bit I would stay with her right now.

After the cold condensate shower so torrid a squall, and her pending departure and the rise of incipient hope—hey, she might let have it off for a farewell, eh?—had their job done. I only begged for a couple of hours – to take the scooter to Vladya's *khutta* and go to change before our meeting at the Park…

Sure enough, my friends returned from the Seim by 17.20 local train, after they combed the entire sand spit in search of scraps that they had so improvidently scattered hither-and-thither at the orgy the night before. Who but I could understand them better? Once I also almost fainted from hunger on the Seim.

They stopped talking to me and boycotted for full 3 days. And who but I could understand them better? You couldn't boycott a dude for longer than 3 days if you played dances with him and your only means of communication was thru disgruntled Chuba.

> (...you can imagine nothing meaner than the betrayal of your chums... Yet, from all the mean deeds in my life that particular one, for some odd reason, I regret the least. Although, of course, I am sorry.
>
> "A skirt chaser, a dishrag, he betrayed his homeboys for a piece of the smelly hole, betrayed for a ho!" would say 95 percent of real bro guys... well, okay, it was overdone – 93 percent is the exact number.
>
> And I would understand them. Moreover, I'd fully agree with them. But most of all I would pity the poor boobs. Too bad luck, they had not come across a woman for whose sake it's worth betraying...)

Now, Olga.

Her breasts certainly lacked the yummy splendor of the melon-like treasures by Natalie. And the nipples were not jutting rigidly as prescribed in the literary tradition to the mentioned parts in the virgin anatomy. Yet, on unbuttoning both her blouse and my shirt to press her topless chest against mine for the first time (she did not have a bra on that occasion after dropping for a sec into the dark *khutta* yard) I was stunned by the immensity of the sensation caused by the naked female flesh.

The fact of her breasts being small and the nipples not too stiff she explained by diving from a cliff after rapans in the sea which happened to be too deep there and that's why at the hospital they had to pierce her breasts.

> (..some whopper for of a gaping sucker's ears? I have no idea.
>
> As a champion dupe, I believe anything they tell me. Faith, I mean it, while listening, I believe anything at all from whoever they be.

And because of my fundamentally delayed mental processing, the logical evaluation of the bullshit they fed to me takes place the following day if not later.

However, at that period I did not care for no logic – be it rapans or other fish. It's only now I feel curious at times – what kind of crap could be them those rapans? But then I'm too lazy to go Googling after them...)

Yet, the most captivating feature about her was her legs.

(..the sexual revolution was raging then all over the world reaching its apogee, and the laws of revolutionary times have no mercy, moreover, the laws of revolutionary fashion.

In modern, democratic times, you can wear whatever you want – be it maxi or midi or unisex. You can even choose to spend all of your life in sportswear and have no problem about it if only the pants legs bear those nice stripes from Adidas.

The sexual revolution established the dictatorship of mini all over the world so that if you considered yourself a woman, you had to bare your knees. The law was simple and short – either your skirt is for at least two inches above your knees or go and join the pack of pensioner lady-oldies idling on the common bench in the yard.

Dura lex, sed lex...)

Olga's mini was 10 inches above her knees. Therefore, when getting seated she chastely dropped her hand between her sportingly ripe thighs so as not to flash her panties. And on that bright and shining sunny day, when I stood next to the Under-Overpass tunnel and stared at her skipping in a nimble athletic style down the stairs from the Plant Park, flashing her yellow sports haircut and the ruby-red mini of hers, it became so clear to me that I was born in the epoch really worth to be born into.

A flick of the breeze tossed up the loincloth of her mini and she, on the run, sat it back with the everlasting gesture of Marilyn Monroe from some other, pre-revolutionary era.

(...at the like moments all the rapans in the world and hungry bros chewing the scraps of dry bread sprinkled with fine riverside sand can go to hell for all I care!

"...two legs...though sad, and cold, and weary

I still remember them..."

Or, as another, surely more pragmatic, chosen of Muse, cared to put it:

" Olga, for them those legs of yours, I'd give anything

except the payday and day off!"...)

He was her co-worker at Rags where she got a job because she hadn't gone to her mother in Theodosia but stayed in Konotop by her aunt.

"Rags" was how they named Recycling Factory on the very outskirts of Konotop, by the first stop of the local train going towards the Seim and farther.

Why not pick a job somewhere closer? Because at Rags they didn't care too much for the labor legislation, and Olga then was barely just 15…

~ ~ ~

On the first of September, I walked to the Konotop Railway Transportation College together with my brother and sister who were also admitted to the institution after graduating their eighth grade that summer.

The students were split to groups and lined-up in the courtyard and the College Director started to push his annual speech. I felt like a *zek* who served his ten-year time and somehow ran into additional 3 years for no misdoing at all. After the line-up finished, I went to the Personnel Department of the College, took my papers back and went to enter the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant. There I was given a job at the same shop floor where Vladya was already a locksmith apprentice – in the Experimental Unit for Metal Constructions by the Repair Shop Floor…

Like most other shops at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, the Mechanical Shop Floor was built of refractory-like brick. Its walls bore no flamboyant ante-revolution extravagances of lace-like brickwork, simplistic evenness stretched plainly from corner to corner in the massive masonry of the building whose spacious inner dimensions comprised 130 meter in length and 8 in height while being thirty-eight-meter wide.

High overhead, under the roof, there rambled a bridge crane rigged with the cab for her operator driving the crane along the rails fixed close to the walls up there. The huge pulley-hook hung on the thick steel cable pulled by the mighty winch running almost all of the bridge length for except the cubicle of cab at the left end where the crane operator got climbing up the iron rungs planted in the brick wall.

The Mechanical Shop Floor building had three wings of lesser height attached to it. The first wing to the right from the entrance gate was the separate Tools Shop Floor, and the remaining two were parts to the Mechanical Shop Floor, only not so tall and without any bridge crane.

The central aisle in the Mechanical Shop Floor was wide enough for two dolly-cars to drive side by side. A dolly-car was a self-propelled cart on small but sturdy wheels with no tires. It had a small pad in its front for a driver to stand upon. Between the driver and the cargo platform, there was a narrow upright metal box with two levers stuck out from its sides, so that the driver could

hold onto them. But it only seemed so, in fact, the driver steered the dolly-car with those levers taking left or right turns.

Dolly-car was, actually, a kind of a pullmi-pushyu. It needed no space for U-turns and, after getting loaded or unloaded in some cramped place, instead of the vehicle, the driver themselves turned round about on their pad and drove back, some clever invention.

The floor in the Mechanical Shop Floor was concrete but, with all those engine oil splotches and smudges from dolly-car tredless wheels, it ages before turned asphalt-black.

Some 30 meters before the end wall, the aisle was crossed by the road from one of the abutting wings to the other, with the fence of upright iron pipes bounding the opposite roadside. Those pipes marked the border between the grounds of the Mechanical and Repair Shop Floors. The border, of course, was transparent and the fence provided three duty-free entries – 1 straight from the central aisle and 2 more alongside the walls...

Past the left-hand border-crossing, beneath the flight of iron stairway, there was a wooden door in the wall opening to the workmen locker room. Next to the door, a small wooden table with a couple of thick, pretty smeared, cardboard folders dropped on its top was abutting the wall, 2 single-plank benches put close by the longer sides of the table completed the arrangement of the Overseers' Nest which was immediately followed by the line of 8 huge vises screwed, with big intervals, onto the edge of one common workbench running alongside the row of tall windows in the wall.

The first in the line was Yasha's vise, then – Mykola-the-old's, farther on – Peter's, still farther – Mykola-the-young's and so on to the gate at the end of the workbench where the sideway track entered the Repair Shop Floor parallel to the inside part in the butt wall of the building.

The sheet-iron-lined front of the workbench had sheet-iron doors in it, under each of the vises, with a neat well-oiled padlock on each door opening to the toolbox. The first was Yasha's box, then Mykola-the-old's and, well... so on…

On the second floor, over the locker room, there was the Management Office of the Repair Shop Floor. That was where led that iron stairway of two flights furnished with iron handrails which also bordered the landing in front of the office door. And from that same landing, the narrow fixed-in-the-wall ladder went up to the cab in the bridge crane for the operator to get there in the morning, or after her midday break, and rumble away to the space above the Mechanical Shop Floor.

The sideway track entering the Repair Shop Floor was a dead end. Bulky contraptions in need of repair came in there heaped on slowly crawling railway platforms, while those of smaller size were brought to the Repair Shop Floor by dolly-cars.

Behind and parallel to the track, there stretched the butt wall which also had hugely tall windows latticed with iron bindings to hold the panes of dusty glass. In the center of the wall above the windows, under the very roof, there hung a large electrical round clock like those at the railway

stations. From time to time, the peaceful slumber of the timepiece got perturbed with a sudden "tick!" which made the half-meter long hand jump for two-three minutes at once and there fall asleep again until the next "tick!".

The third wall had the same five-meter-tall windows. Next to the right-hand border-crossing from the Mechanical Shop Floor, there stood a drilling machine for anyone who felt like using it. Then came the steel-topped acres of the marker's table and, in the corner behind the tracks of the dead-end, the lathe with its turner.

Along the central axis in the Repair Shop Floor, there stood another long workbench or rather two of them abutting each other face-to-face, with an iron-mesh partition in between. Common-sense-based safety rules, if you think of it: had a hammer slipped out of grip, the mesh would prevent knocking out a workman at the opposite workbench.

Walking the Repair Shop Floor, you had to watch your step carefully to safely navigate between giant worm gears, oil-smeared casings, and other whatnots strewn indiscriminately upon the floor. Those things, brought by dolly-cars and dropped at vacant spots a couple of months before, were waiting patiently for the due attention because there always popped up something else, more pressing for urgent repair. But that was not our concern. We were the Experimental Unit by the Repair Shop Floor, sited at the workbench next to the Overseers' Nest.

No, we did not meddle with repair, our task was to implement the projects experimentally drawn at the Design Bureau in the Plant Management building, to endow them with the real-life forms of metal constructions. The handcart of four wheels, for example, or the stand "Glory to Labor!" to be placed in front of Main Check-Entrance to the Plant. Or all kinds of bearing constructions made of solid rolled-steel channels and joists, like, brackets, pillars, roof trusses.

However, for so bulky products there was no room at the Repair Shop Floor and we assembled them under the open sky outside, on the rack-deck between the welder's booth by the sideway gate and the window of the locker room. By the by, the parts for the city TV tower were also constructed on that rack-deck, and then the team of workers from our Experimental Unit assembled the tower at its site. But that was before me…

For the initial three months, I was a locksmith apprentice couched by Peter Khomenko. For him, it was a good news because a locksmith's wages somewhat increased when he was in charge of training a newbie. On the other hand, Peter was not sure what else to do about his apprentice, after he handed me a spare key from his toolbox in the workbench under his vise, so that I could keep there my hammer, chisel, and file they handed me at the Tool Shop Floor. Okay, he showed how to produce a scratcher out a throwaway length of thin steel wire to draw marks on a sheet of iron but now what?

Along all our line of vises by the Overseers' Nest, a workman at work was a completely rare sight. Unless at the end of the working day when someone was tinkering up some kind of *shabashka* for household needs at his *khutta*.

Nevertheless, the entire workforce was principally always busy. A couple of locksmiths pottering with the welder at the mainstay props outside the locker room window. Some went to dismantle the roller table in the Foundry Shop Floor. Another group was led by Senior Oversee to the Boiler Shop Floor to install four anchor bolts for a jib crane under the construction there. In general and on the whole, the work was running high. Somewhere… If not at one, then at the other place... Maybe.

The managers of the Repair Shop Floor were doing their work in the office upstairs even though the CEO of the Repair Shop Floor, Lebedev, visited the premises no oftener than two times a day. Where he worked before and after those visits I had no idea.

He wore a black greatcoat of the railwaymen uniform. In summer, of course, it was swapped for a jacket of that same uniform with silver-colored buttons. At walking, the CEO's back was held so plumb upright that it didn't take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out the man's being in a well-befogged state already. However, even though his front side could betray the fact of Lebedev's being drunk as a fiddler, he never stumbled the slightest bit. No, never. The workers respected him, probably, for his never staying in the office longer than for five-ten minutes.

In the table of ranks, the CEO was followed by Managers of the Units by the Repair Shop Floor. The Repair Unit was headed by Manager Mozgovoy, whose thin falsetto somehow did not fit his portly frame, still, he also was respected for his being harmless.

Once at the Repair Unit, they were restoring the concavity profile of some bulky incomprehensible thing. Whoever you asked what the crap was that thing, the answer was invariably uniform, "Who the fuck knows what hooey it is." And even that "hooey" was pronounced identically, almost in a howl, like, "...hooooey it is."

So for half of a month, they kept scraping that concavity in turns. Whoever got tired of doing nothing took the hand scraper and commenced to scrape. Eventually, it got polished to a mirror shine and another hooey (the convex thing) began to freely enter and rotate, back and forth, inside the scraped one. Mozgovoy, sure thing, was delighted by such a labor achievement at his Section...

Well, now, locksmith Lekha from the Podlipnoye village, freshly after his army service, in the end of a working day puts a chisel at the shiny surface of the polished hooey and asks, with the hammer raised to his shoulder, "Look here, Mozgovoy, wanna me fuck the fucker?"

In a wistful, tired falsetto, Mozgovoy responded, "If you have no brains, go – fuck it."

Lyokha, certainly, was just horsing around, yet Mozgovoy did not tell on him although he could…

Then followed Manager of the Experimental Unit, Lyonya...

> (...hmm, it's embarrassing, I can recollect the mole on Lyonya's upper lip but his last name gives me the slip...)

About him, it was not clear yet: to respect or not to respect? He was still wet behind his ears and until recently was sitting in the Overseers' Nest by the locker room door. Then he graduated something in absentia and got raised, with his diploma, up the iron stairway, to the Management Office where were already sitting Engineer-Technologist (at the desk with his back to the window, but I don't even remember his name) and Senior Overseer, Melai, Anatoly Melai's father. He had a wide horizontal gash of a mouth and he was always silent, unlike his yodeling son…

Twice a month the stairway to the Management Office was climbed by the cashier with her tarpaulin bag from which she portioned out the advance or monthly payment to the workers depending on which of her two visits it was. The very first time, she gave me the advance of just 20 rubles.

When I brought my first earnings home, then, before Mother's return from her work, I scattered those 20 bills all over the couch in the kitchen, one by one, so that it would seem more. And when she was back home, I said, "Mom, that's for you to dispose of." And right away I asked 2 rubles for cigarettes, without going into detail because she did not know that I had started smoking…

The working day began at eight in the morning. We passed thru the still silent aisle in the Mechanical Shop Floor to our locker room with tall plywood boxes along three blind walls and two additional rows of lockers put back to back to split the room into the oblong halves.

Each locker-box had two vertical sections: one for the clean clothes and the other for the working dress, aka *spetzovka*, given out to a workman once a year. From above, the sections were spanned by a plywood shelf for the hat and the package with the midday meal. However, at the midday meal breaks, both Vladya and I went home over a stile in the concrete wall to Professions Street from where it took just five minutes to get to our *khuttas*.

While we changed and had a smoke in the locker room, the Mechanical Shop Floor machine-tools started to turn on, one after another. The howling, rapping, and rumbling of their engines merged with the piercing screech of steel peeled off the workpieces. The cacophony of a working day was muffled to some extent by the locker room door but very soon it swung open and Overseer Borya Sakoon drove us out to our workplaces – to the line of vises or to the rack-deck in the yard where we seemed being busy with doing something...

The rest of the day, Borya Sakoon spent sitting by the locker room door on a bench at the Overseers' Nest table. He leaned on it with his elbow, then with the other one and was chain-smoking cigarettes "Prima", one after another. Short, with thin fair hair and dun faded face, he had the same last name as Vladya but wasn't a relative because both denied any kinship.

Frequent coughing fits made him pull his cap down and press it to his face to choke the discharge. When his therapeutics did not work, he slammed the cap atop the table and went on coughing with his face dropped into it. Then he snapped out of his pocket another cigarette, lit it

up and the cough eventually died away until the next attack. At times, he stood up from the bench to stretch his whole body—a scraggy shrimp with his arms aloft against the tide of mad rambling of the machine-tools in the Mechanical Shop Floor—then he lit another cigarette, turned back and sat down again.

Once Overseer beckoned me with a finger inviting to get seated on the opposite bench at the table and, yelling over the roaring howl of the machine-tools, began to tell how soon after the war he went to dances in the club of Podlipnoye, where the village yobos started bullying him so he cut and ran but they were chasing and he had to lie down in a ditch and shoot his Walther pistol from there, and that he also witnessed how the law enforcing bodies did away with the All-Union thief-in-law, handled Kushch, who came to Konotop but they were following him and in Budyonny Street just neared from behind and banged into the back of his head, one second later a "black raven" drove up and he, a young guy Borya at that time, was told to grab Kushch by the legs and help to heave the corpse into the vehicle.

"Up to these days it's nowhere you can buy the fabric like to that in the Kushch's suit pants," he shouted out and his fingers picked off his lips a stuck thread of tobacco fiber from a cigarette "Prima".

However, not always Borya Sakoon looked such a total good-for-nothing. One day, Vladya called me to drop into Loony and watch our Overseer drilling the Ballet Group in the hall on the second floor, where a dozen girls held onto the handrail along the mirror wall, while our geezer strolled along their line like a karra cock sporting a short, diamond-shaped, necktie. Then, demonstrating some of the moves, he shot his leg almost above his head. That's some Borya Sakoon…

The hardest period in the whole working day was the concluding half-hour. In that half-hour there was no time at all: it just stopped and it was better not to even look at that electric round clock above the huge windows in the end wall. Some endless stretch of vexing disappointment which brought about a strange itch to push the frozen clock hand with a straw.

> (...I have no idea why with a straw, but that's what I hankered for at those periods when there was no time, although I fully understood that the straw would only break instead of moving that iron piece of crap...)

The Mechanical Shop Floor machine tools would slow down and fell silent, one after another. The locksmiths of the Experimental Unit gathered from elsewhere to line the workbench with their backs leaned against their respective vises.

The two-meter-tall Mykola-the-old empties his horse-long nose into the crumpled lump of a rag the color of earth-and-ash. Could you ever suspect so gentlemanly habits by the geezer?! Mykola-the-young froze at pensive picking fresh acne on his cheeks.

Tick! Twenty-seven to five.

Swarthy-faced Yasha begins to tell me a story how the Red Army took him along after liberating Konotop of Germans. A solitary *shabashka*-tinker at the grinding wheel in the corner does not interfere with the calm flow of Yasha's narration.

They ran to attack and the ours supported them from behind shooting the "forty-fivers" when one of the supporting shells shot off the balls of an attacker. With the slow move of his palm-down hand, Yasha demonstrates the low-arc trajectory of a flying 45-mm shell. After which the poor wretch ran another half-kilometer before he died...

Recollecting how I also felt nothing and only saw the ground of the bumpy field jumping before my eyes, as we ran to attack thru the shaggy fog in the military game of Zarnitsa, I believe Yasha.

He shifts his cap far back revealing the sharp, like an arrowhead, angle from which his black hair runs up under the halo of his cap peak. Not a speckle of gray. Looks twice younger than Borya Sakoon who once told me that at the installation of the TV tower something went wrong with the uppermost section. It was in winter with severe frost and Yasha took off his sheepskin coat, climbed up by the cable and put it to rights.

Mykola-the-old two heads taller than Yasha. They're sort of chums and after work go home by the same diesel train, only to different stops.

Tick! Seven to five. Okay, that's that; time to go to change…

Skully also dropped out of the Railway Transportation College and entered our Experimental Unit which was a smart move. They didn't pay him any scholarship there but after getting the diploma he'd be sent to slave in the middle of one or another nowhere. Did he really need it?

So three of The Orpheuses got together. As for Chuba, he worked at the Car Repair Shop Floor put there by some protective hairy hand because a carpenter's profession is cleaner than ours and better paid for, we scarcely ever ran into each other in the Plant.

And we continued to play dances even when Vladya chiseling sheet-iron peened heartily his finger. Club paid each of us thirty-six rubles a month. It seemed too little, but what could we do? At our attempt at talking business to the Club Director, he said that after buying the electric guitar for one 150 rubles there remained no funds to increase our salary.

True, the guitar of Iolanta brand was a classy thing – so neatly streamlined and it sounded miles better than make-it-yourself ones after *The Radio* magazine guide, Iolanta's smooth scarlet gleam eclipsed and turned them into pieces of spray-painted plywood.

Soon after, I was sent together with Projectionist Konstantin Borisovich to the city of Chernigov after new instruments from the local music factory there – the bass, and rhythm electric guitars. Pavel Mitrofanovich talked to the Plant Management and I was exempted from work for two days, because of the long way to Chernigov and back.

There we stayed overnight in a hotel as business travelers, and at nine in the morning we were at the factory. Konstantin Borisovich went to talk with their management and I had to wait in the corridor for a couple of endless hours. At last, they called me in for checking the guitars which had no cases, and were much heavier than Iolanta, and covered even if with the glossy but black lacquer. It was clear at once that the factory hadn't yet mastered the electric guitar manufacture or, maybe, Konstantin Borisovich did not have enough funds on him to purchase some better products. Although, when we brought the caseless instruments to Konotop, Chuba admitted that the bass guitar would do.

The following Monday in the Repair Shop Floor locker room, Vladya kicked up agitation for us, all the Orpheuses, to get exemption from work for health reasons. His idea was to visit the Plant Medical Center with complaints about the sausage we ate the day before when playing trash at a wedding which snack was certainly stale. Only we had to go all together and keep saying the same thing.

So we found Chuba in the Car Repair Shop Floor and the 4 of us arrived in the Medical Center facilities all ill because of the bummer sausage we never ate.

The doctor suggested us get seated on chairs under the corridor wall and sent the nurse to the Plant Bath House after tin basins which were brought and lined on the floor at our feet – one basin for each of the ailing Orpheuses. The morbid preparations were crowned with her fetching a bucket of luke-warm water which she made purple pouring in a handful of potassium permanganate.

The doctor came back from his office and explained that the concoction should be drunk in liters before poking two fingers into the mouth, each person their own, to tickle the root of each respective tongue as deep as possible, which procedure would remedy the obvious food poisoning.

The macabre aspect of the basins in their waiting position on the floor as well as the instructions delivered with an unmistakable sadistic pleasure worked like a charm on both Chuba and Skully, their crises was over in no time to speak of and, leaving no traces, they hurried to their respective workplaces.

However, Vladya's and my cases evinced a graver nature and we staunchly endured the whole hog of the procedure throwing up into the basins everything that we had for breakfast that morning. The doctor, impressed by our obstinacy, gave us exemption for the current working day.

We changed and left thru the Main Check-Entrance in the crowd of workers going out to the canteen for the midday break. Thus, for all our pains and labors we got just scarce 4 hours of freedom, all in all, and the next morning – get back to the mill, O, boy!.

The Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich, kept us informed that Club was fixin' to buy an electric organ Yonika to be played by Lyokha Kuzko as the fifth Orpheus. Lyokha had thinning but long, reddish hair and sported a horseshoe-shaped mustache a-la The Pesnyary to somehow distract the

public attention from the severe bend in his nose, the legacy of some old-times fight. Because of that disfigured nose, his handle was Rhinoceros.

He was seven years older than us, yet he was a cool dude who had The White Album by The Beatles on his tape-recorder which he played to Vladya and me when he invited us to his place. His father, Anatoly Efimovich Kuzko, the teacher in button-accordion class at Club, had built for Rhinoceros a red-brick two-story house in the yard of his fatherly *khutta*. The first floor was the garage with a sheet-iron gate, and on the second floor, there were two rooms and a kitchen. Some folks could live conveniently, anyway. Yet, the garage stayed empty of any car because Kuzko Senior did not buy it for Lyokha who was drinking like a fish for which reason his wife Tatyana left him taking their baby daughter away.

Besides The White Album, Lyokha also shared *The Forensic Medicine Textbook* to look thru. The yellowish aged pages had lots of black-and-white photographs with explanatory notes beneath them.

Knowing the illustrations by heart, Lyokha shared his favorite spot in the textbook, where there were rows of small-sized pictures (3 by 2 cm, like for a passport), demonstrating the difference between intact and dented hymens.

> (...I have a strong suspicion that because of that textbook, all kinds of pornographic publications give me so dreadful shudder.
>
> No kidding, they cram me with panic, I fear on turning a page in *The Playboy* to get smack midst a murder with the household scissors sticking from the open chest of the body up into my face, or else a guy strangled against an upturned stool, you never can tell...)

Climbing up and down the Plant concrete wall at midday-meal breaks was a real shortcut that spared a half-kilometer walk if compared to going thru the Main Check-Entrance.

At home, I warmed up soup or vermicelli on the kerogas in the veranda and took the meal into the kitchen where I doffed my *spetzovka* pants and jacket keeping only my tank top and underpants on. It caused no inconvenience to anyone because with the parents at work and the younger ones at their College I was home alone.

The reason for taking off my working clothes was those surplus ten minutes before going back to the Plant. While eating, you could use a stool even with your dirty *spetzovka* on, yet smearing the couch or an armchair with it was not right.

To fill the odd ten minutes up, I strummed the guitar and screamed different songs to train my vocal skills which I have never had. Yet, I sang all the same – may Beata Tyszkiievich, a professional Polish beauty torn from a color magazine and pinned above the folding bed-couch, forgive me as well as The Who in the black-and-white photo next to her. They also witnessed one time how my wild wails happened to bring about a boner and, grabbing from the desk under

the window a ruler left behind by the younger gone to their college, I measured my cock. Locksmithing definitely instills respectful attitude towards knowledge of specific details...

One day, coming back after the midday break, Vladya and I saw Skully on a bench of the Overseers' Nest in the company of Borya Sakoon and some stranger in clean clothes.

"Here they're coming," said Overseer, and the man suggested us, including Skully as well, to go along with him. From the flitting farewell grimace on Borya Sakoon's mug, we could get it that the invitation was issued by a representative of law-enforcement organs, staying in the dark though as to why.

Clad in our faded T-shirts with no *spetzovka* jackets on because of a sunny, hot, October day, we followed his athletic figure in a tartan shirt walking contrary to the flow of latecomers who leisurely sauntered from the canteen in the square outside the Main Check-Entrance gate. Everything went as usual, and only we were pulled out and estranged from the routine life of the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant.

"Where to, smarties?" asked Peter Khomenko flashing a broad smile from the counter-directed stream of workmen, yet, at the abrupt turnabout of our escort, his mirth dried up at once and he accelerated his pace towards the Mechanical Shop Floor, not caring to wait for an answer.

"Who's that?" asked our guard-and-guide alertly. I replied that was my tutor, and we left the Plant thru the Main Check-Entrance.

He told us to get into the Volga thru whose windshield shimmering in the sunshine, there peeped Chuba's face wearing a nervous smile, and they took us to the City Militia Department, which was next to the Passport Bureau.

Behind the gate to the City Militia Department, there was a wide yard-coral bounded by barrack-type one-story buildings. We were separated and led to different rooms in different buildings where different people began to ask us questions and write down our responses.

Of course, not everything in the proceedings got recorded. For instance, the interrogation of Skully started as follows, "Do you know that fucking moron?"

"Which moron?"

"The one who brought you here."

"No, I dunno."

"That was Head of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"No, I dunno."

At that moment I was interrogated by the mentioned f-f...er...well, I mean, Head of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Seated at the large desk, pretty hunky, with his hair sticking closely to the skull, he asked who the day before was present at the rehearsal in the Variety Ensemble room in Club... And who was the last to leave?. Who was approaching the closet where so much expensive German accordion of four registers had been kept?.

He took notes all the time and when the phone on his desk rang, the receiver got picked and pressed to his ear with his shoulder raised to the tilted head, the way Marlon Brando did in the movie where he was the sheriff, while the moron kept writing on...

After interrogating all of us, they told us we were free to go and might be getting back to work... We sauntered up along the street to the Department Store and turned left towards Peace Square. 4 Orpheuses in smeared *spetzovka* pants and old T-shirts... Along Peace Avenue, we also strolled in no hurry – the working day was ending at five.

In Zelenchuk Area, we had a bit of fun, jumping at each other like Mazandaran tigers and tearing down the worn T-shirts on our bodies. We did not stop the revelry until all the four T-shirts were torn wide open from their collars to the waist. And why not? The day was sunny and pretty warm, so we simply tied the tatters with knots upon our navels and went on, like happy hippies. It was Skully to start the whole horseplay, probably, because he had such a hairy chest…

Next week, coming back to the Plant after the midday break I, as always, dropped into Vladya's *khutta* to flock and go on together. Vladya shared the news about one of his neighbor's hens who died in the yard that morning and concluded with the suggestion of taking the body over with us to hang it in our locker room, just for fun.

The plan did not inspire me too much but I still lent Vladya a helping hand in smuggling the demised into the Plant because you needed both your hands to climb the wall along Professions Street but if dragging along a newspaper package with a dead hen, you had nothing to grab hold of those holes in the concrete slabs with...

From the locker room ceiling there hung a length of wire for a light bulb, which was missing together with its socket. Vladya took someone's unfinished *shabashka* from under the window, rested it on a locker in the middle row, climbed upon the work in progress and wrapped the unemployed wire around the hen's neck. She froze up there with her dirty white wings spread loosely above the naked skinny legs.

The midday break was over and the Mechanical Shop Floor machine-tools started their scraping wails when a plump black-haired locksmith from the Repair Unit entered the room. Catching a glimpse of the bird, he did not laugh but left immediately. In a split-second our Overseer, Borya Sakoon, flew in.

With his eyebrows shot up and the lips pouched to farm the small letter "o", motionlessly stood he for one entire moment staring at the listless animal above his uplifted face. Then he turned over to us, "Hairy-yobbos! You did it, bitches!"

For some unadvertised reason, Borya was in the habit of calling The Orpheuses working at the Experimental Unit "the hairy-yobbos"...

We, certainly, denied the allegation but Vladya took the dead bird off, wrapped it back into the same newspaper and dropped somewhere outside the Repair Shop Floor. In the final analysis, Borya was right – with merely two eyewitnesses, by the end of that working day the entire Repair Shop Floor knew that the hairy-yobbos (the workingmen masses slavishly aped the Overseer's example in calling us that name) fixed a chick in the locker room. And if the thing remained there for at least half-hour it would inevitably kick off grim rumors circulating Konotop about someone got hanged at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant…

~ ~ ~

Olga and I ceased dating at the gate of her aunt's *khutta* because we found a more suitable place, or rather she showed it to me.

A little farther along Budyonny Street, there was a short dead-end to the left, leading up to the closed iron gate of the oil storage base. Near that gate, by the garden fence on the roadside, there stood a park bench. Who and when schlepped it so far from the Park I couldn't say but, strategically, it was positioned in an impeccably correct spot wrapped in the shadow out of reach of the feeble light from the bulb above the closed base gate. On that bench, I got acquainted in absentia with Olga's Konotop relatives...

Her mother's sister, Nina, immediately after the war served as a telephone net switcher at the headquarters of a Soviet Army division stationed in Poland. On her demobilization, Nina didn't return to the Soviet Union because she had married a Pole and they had a child already, so Nina stayed to live in her husband's land.

4 years later, she arrived in Konotop to attend the funeral of one of her parents and that was a mistake. They never let her go back despite the fact that her young daughter remained in Poland, and the country itself was a member of the Socialist Camp Community. She never found out what happened to her daughter or her husband nor did she know anything about their current situation, because none of her letters was answered.

After 15 more years, Aunt Nina registered her marriage to Uncle Kolya who did not drink and had a good job in the forestry, only he often needed to go somewhere by his motorcycle with a sidecar. Yet, he had built a really good *khutta* of three rooms and a kitchen. They had no children and adopted a baby girl, named her Olya and were very fond of her. Not long ago they bought a piano for Olya although it's, probably, too late to start playing it at eleven.

Aunt Nina worked at the Meat-Packing Plant in three shifts. To reach her workplace she had to walk two kilometers along the railway track on the city outskirts. But on the other hand, her

family didn't need buying meat at Bazaar because even though the bags of workers after their shifts were looked thru at the Meat-Packing Plant check-entrance, they never frisked the panties of exiting women...

And on that same bench, we talked about Art. For example, there we discussed the "Romeo and Juliet" after watching the movie together in the basement cinema at Loony.

"They talked and talked and I could not make a damn thing out what all their talks were about, yet tears were dripping from my eyes all the same just like by some fool..."

> (...which was a very well-defined assessment, by the by, because the rhymed and metered speech makes words you know seem unknown obscuring even so simple a fact that more than one of noble ladies in Verona, way younger than you, had babies at your age...)

It was also there (I'm still about the bench) that Olga harpooned me up, hard and securely. She uttered just one phrase but if you're a born patsy of graphomaniac you're in a deep trap.

"Yesterday I entered in my diary: '...when he kissed me goodbye I was devastatingly happy.'"

Dammit! You're done for! And there is no way out! Firstly, in many tons of the read and re-read literary output, I had never come across such an expression " devastatingly happy". Secondly, she kept a diary! Thirdly, but not lastly, I was there in that journal!.

After the dances, we sometimes saw her girlfriend Sveta to the porch of Sveta's *khutta*. At so late a time the Konotopers who dwelt in *khutta*s did not venture into their yards, more so Sveta's Granny and Grandpa. After giggling by our side for the stretch of a smoke, Sveta went in to bed, and the porch with the narrow plank bench was left at our disposal.

On one of such evenings, Olga told me to wait on that porch while she'd be gone to her *khutta* because Aunt Nina had the third shift that day and Uncle Kolya left by his motorcycle for someplace in the district.

It took a long wait before from the neighboring yard came the tinkle of the handle-latch in the wicket closed by departing Aunt Nina. A few minutes later, Olga appeared at the porch and mutely beckoned me to follow. We went out into the back-alley and noiselessly entered the yard of her *khutta*.

The door from the veranda opened to a large kitchen succeeded by an even larger living-room to the right, and a bedroom to the left, both separated from the kitchen by cloth curtains in the doorways. After the living-room, there was another bedroom for Olga and small Olya. We did not go there but turned into the owners' bedroom to the left.

Olga switched on the feeble night-light lamp and went out to the bedroom behind the living room. I was left alone facing the large double bed of a ceremonial aspect dimly glinting its

nickel-plated siderails, and a smaller, more casual, bed next to the curtains in the doorway to the kitchen. Tight grip of unrelenting tension overwhelmed me.

She returned in a dressing gown whose unbuttoned sides were kept in place by her arms folded on its front. Not uttering a word, we both looked at the smaller bed and Olga put out the light. Under the gown, she had only panties on. I hastened to follow the suit reserving just my underpants. Then, in the bed, there followed a long wordless wrestling match for each of her dressing gown sleeves. Finally, I threw the whole item on a chair by the wall, the score of the clothes we had on became even – 1:1.

When I turned over to her, she lay on her back under the cover pulled up to her chest shielded by her tightly crossed arms. I felt it was chilly in the room and got under the cover too. The scramble to peel her small panties off took no less efforts than that about the large dressing gown. At last, there we were both stark naked, next to the cover shoved aside because it got darn hot under it. And then…

Then she writhed and dodged furiously from under me, pushing my hands away. I managed only to rub my cock between her thighs and against the tiny turf of hair without knowing what was what but feeling just a little more and...Now, almost...about there...Damn, she turned off again!.

> (...I would do the deed, I swear I would, if only I had time enough... That night the cuckoo in the kitchen clock went crazy and jumped out with her shrill "coo! coo!" every other couple of minutes and now it was already croaking six and soon Olya was gonna be up for her breakfast, school so I had to put things on, quick, and get away before Aunt Nina were back from her work...)

Of course, that night we allowed ourselves too much and got way too far for any fail-safe. Hugs and kisses by the *khutta* wicket or on Sveta's porch were not enough anymore, and wouldn't do.

But where? And when? On November 7, said Olga, after young Olya would have passed in the holiday demonstration column of her school and be taken by Uncle Kolya and Aunt Nina on a visit to his village.

And that time no tricks would help Olga to wriggle away, the cuckoo's cries would mean nothing with the whole night being our own…

On the morning of the Great October Revolution Day, I came after Olga because we also were going out in the festive city. She was retouching with a pencil her trimmed, thread-thin, brows, and marking the corners of her eyes, spiffing up, in short.

There was no one but us, yet to my hug, she didn't respond with her body and said, "Why hurry? The *khutta* is ours today. It's only...You know, there's something..."

(I froze in mortification, could it be she's going to announce she had her time of the month?)

Well, in general, if I wanted it... well, I knew what... to come to pass, then I had to agree to one condition...

"What?! Speak out!"

Now, before going out to the city she would make up my eyes.

What the fuck?!. Though, if you come to think about it, that was better than her being on the rag… Hercules would understand me. After the victorious fights against the Nemean Lion, the Lernean Hydra, the Cretan Bull, and other monsters, he was made (by a chick named Omphal) wear a female dress and spin the yarn in a gynoecium, with her high heel crushing his male's dignity's throat. At least in some way, I'd equal that inhumanly hunky demigod... And I agreed...

Blueish eye shadows tinted my eyelids, black eyeliner accentuated the lashes... And out we went to the city...

> (...at present, in the aftermath of all those "blue" and "pink" revolutions, after Elton John was knighted, after the charming cutie pirate Jack Sparrow, etc., etc., people became more intelligently aware.
>
> In those pre-enlightment days folks needed more than a glance to get it what the heck was there with my visage. Then some shrugged, others giggled...)

Borya Sakoon, who came out of his five-story block in Zelenchuk Area greeted me cheerfully but, after a more focused look, suddenly changed in his face. Genuine fright distorted the worn-out facial features of Overseer, the unfinished "hairy yob..." stuck in his throat and he fled back to the block of his residence.

> (...and that was the man who survived the rampant banditry and all kinds of "black cat" gangs in the post-war Konotop!
>
> Or maybe because of that? To grab the old Walther gun from the down-most drawer in his chiffonier?..)

"You are nuts on the run from their having your head checked," concluded my younger sister Natasha flatly, when she met us on the sidewalk of Peace Avenue.

> ***" ...but I don't care***
>
> ***'cause of this hardon..."***

In the Central Park of Recreation, Olga took out her cosmetic bag and washed out my War Paint, so much for faking a Hercules. Then Skully's girlfriend Nina with her girlfriend Ira came up to us, and the 3 girls walked off looking for a place to have a smoke.

A pack of Settlement bros approached me, they were celebrating it in full swing already. They felt elated, they wanted that an Orpheus from the Settlement was also *nyshtyak*. They tore off the lid from an intact bottle and handed it to me... Everything in this life is to be paid for, even your popularity. I raised the bottle up, threw back my head, cast the parting look at the sun, and started drinking from the bottle's neck.

Then the bottle went from hands to hands around the circle warm and emotional.

Then we went to a deli for more wine.

Then I felt sick and reeled off home...

I woke up in the lean-to on the iron bed which inherited the space from the "Jawa" bike when the Arkhipenkos moved to their apartment. My "dacha" season had already been over, but the bed still tarried in the lean-to and, as it happened, that was the rightest place for it.

I woke up with my raincoat and shoes on, but the bare spring mesh of the bed didn't mind. The main thing was that I hadn't overslept the farewell dances that we were playing in Park that night. Only I still had to trudge all the way there being so stiff and with that oily smack in my dried up mouth and—ouch!—with that pain in the nape...

I finally came there when everyone was already schlepping the equipment to the dance-floor stage. Lyokha fussed that I was shirking, and Olga too began to lay into, "Where did you get lost?"

I hardly could explain that I was very so very much sick, and Lyokha said all that I needed was a hearty swig to get back to life. I shuddered at the very thought of it, but Lyokha and Olga started to laugh at me.

Yurko, the young guy whom Olga used as her errand-boy, ran to a nearby deli and brought wine. I forced myself to take a few gulps and—lo!—the remedy brought me back to life...

After the dances were over and the equipment dragged back to the ticket office, Olga and I left the Plant Park and in 2 minutes of suspensive walking reached her back-alley.

The first *khutta*, then the Sveta's one, the third was for us. I assuredly walked Olga to the wicket, opened it and... all of a sudden, she recoiled!.

By age, I was two years older than Olga, yet always felt, like, it was another way around. She knew more than I learned from all the stuff in all the books I read.

Besides, she enjoyed respect and authority. Whenever any of the girlfriend in our bohemian milieu had problems with outsiders, she turned to Olga for help. Olga walked out with the brazen and put the stupid cow in her proper place…

It was a rare evening when the dances went off without a fight... A multi-voiced discordant squeal broke suddenly from the dance-floor, yet not at all in time with the number played at the moment. In the dense mass of the youth gathered for collective recreation, a circle of vacant space formed in no time, filled with the blur of rapid gusts of fists milling the air. The vortex swept, tornado-like, across the dance-floor, thru piercing shrieks of girls giving way.

Abruptly yet asynchronously, we cut playing and encouraged dear friends to keep order, please. The defeated side, alone or in a ring of his bros, was pushing thru the crowd to the exit. To remove the low depressing hum, Skully set the tempo with dry snaps of sticks against each other and we started the next number...

Girls though did not make a show of their dissent and for their cat-fights invited each other to go out. Olga went out just a couple of times and gained respect and authority because in Theodosia she started attending dance-floors at the age of thirteen and, without wasting time on verbal preliminaries, decked them bang off. As a result, if some frostbitten bitch hurt feelings of a girl from the bohemian circle, then mentioning Olga's name was quite enough to make her realize the blunder and shut up.

Another reason why Olga seemed maturer than me was the attentive attitude towards her from mujiks.

Once after the dances, when we were collecting cables and stuff from upon the stage, a frightened dude raced into the dance-floor, crossed it and jumped over the fence into the darkness of the Plant Park. At the last moment his chaser, a hairy-ass mujik over thirty, managed to deal a glancing strike and the fugitive sprawled into the bushes, but bounced up at once and ran away.

"I'll catch you, bitch!" cried the triumphant and, turning to Olga who stood by the stage, added, "Ain't it, Red-Haired?"

"You yoursel is the word," Olga answered diplomatically, and the latter swagger out the dance-floor.

That's why I felt to be younger than her. But the moment she flinched at the wicket to the dark *khutta* that feeling dissolved, and everything fell into place. Next to her fear, I felt older and stronger than her, I felt pity for her and compassion. After all, the younger ones should be cared for and protected. Even from ourselves.

I comforted the frightened girl and left without entering the yard. On my way to Nezhyn Street, I knew that I had done the righteous thing and was pleased with myself, yet all the same, I couldn't but agree with the diagnosis by my sister Natasha – "nuts on the run from their having my head checked "…

~ ~ ~

On November 7, the unusually long Indian summer ended and we moved over to Club to play dances there.

The Ballet Studio Gym opposite the cinema auditorium on the second floor was a tremendous room stretching for about 40 meters from its entrance to the small stage at the far end wall. The stage was intended not for concerts but for Evenings of Recreation and, therefore, was just a low deck with two steps running all its front. That way a recreating participant could easily ascend it when called by the mass-entertainer to take part in some funny competition or another event in the ongoing Evening.

The stage-deck took the central one-third of Ballet Gym's width the rest of which was sealed off with vertical bars of black-paint-coated rebar rods on both sides from the elevation. The light cloth curtains hanging behind the bars formed, like, some backstage.

In the center of Ballet Gym, high overhead, midst the roof bearing structures painted with the black Kuzbass-Lacquer, there was fixed a large white ball encrusted with the scale-like mirror shards all over. Besides, among the joists there was also installed a searchlight focused on the ball and one click of the switch set in motion the ball-rotating electric motor and also hit the ball's rind of mirror-scales with the straight beam from the searchlight to get fractured into innumerable dim specks of light idly floating along over all and everything within the huge Ballet Gym.

The length-side walls consisted mostly of manifold tall windows, below which the handrail for the students of ballet art ran from end to end. The butt wall opposite the stage was paneled, according to the ballet school tradition, with large, tight fitted, squares of mirrors which conferred onto the room its second name – the Mirror Hall...

The Mirror Hall served an ideal place for any get-together, both the New Year matinees for the Settlement kids, and School Graduating Parties, and Evenings of Recreation for the Plant youth, and, last but not least, for dances. And the dances it was to reveal the ideal's weak spot – its floor. In less than a month the treds of a couple of hundred dancers scuffed the red paint coat off the floor and bared its timber planks. Yet, the Club Director, Pavel Mitrofanovich, said it did not matter.

Behind the curtains on both sides of the stage, there were installed the huge loudspeakers transported from the summer cinema in the Plant Park, and they produced some really bomb sound, awesome *nyshtyak*! In the common reflection, blurred by the distance to the far-off wall of the Mirror Hall, our figures with guitars stuck up over the rhythmically swaying whirlpool of dancers' heads in the huge murky void whose only illumination was the floating swarm of soft light specks – round and round, and round – and everything went on *nyshtyak* thru and thru.

And only Chuba fussed and bitched that the sound of his bass guitar put out by the two portable loudspeakers on the stage was lost completely behind the mighty boxes with the meter-wide speakers. Lyokha usually assuaged him that he knew a guy who had low-frequency bass speakers for sale, we only had to procure material for making a box to install those. And it was also Lyokha to suggest the relevant place where to get the material in question – the

KahPehVehRrZeh Plant. After all, we needed just one sheet of thick plywood, all in all, 3 by 2 meters.

We, the Plant affiliated Orpheuses, started to mull over a plan... In the Repair Shop Floor, there was no plywood whatsoever, iron and steel were all we dealt with. The proper place to look for plywood was surely the Car Repairing Shop Floor, where Chuba worked. And he admitted that the plywood could be extracted from the cars brought for repair, but how to get it outta Plant?

He resolutely declined the proposal to cut the plywood into pieces the size of the bass box parts and drop them over the wall in Professions Street because his overseer would fire off uncomfortable questions about the source for such immodest quantities of so expensive material.

Thus, there remained the one and only option – to get a whole, intact, sheet out of Plant thru the Club building, with its never closed side door to the Plant grounds, next to the movie list painters' room.

However, the planned mission had a certain slippery point – the Car Repair Shop Floor and Club were located at the opposite ends of Plant. Dragging the whole sheet thru all of the Plant territory? Chuba refused to take such a risk, neither Skully showed any whiff of enthusiasm. As usual, the hardest part in undertaking rested entirely on my and Vladya's shoulders…

Still and all, Chuba partially collaborated and ripped the plywood sheet loose in a car waiting for repair on a sideway outta his shop floor. Besides, leaving the car, he somehow forgot to lock its door as required by the regulations... Thru the above-mentioned door, I and Vladya penetrated the car to find, in the indicated place, the coveted treasure – a standard sheet of thirty-millimeter-thick plywood blotted in a couple of spots but, on the whole, it did not matter.

We dragged the plywood out of the car, grabbed at the edges, and carried on over the crunching gravel of the track ballast shoulder, then along the even and not so noisy asphalt paths between the Plant shop floors. On the way, we kept persuading each other that the sheet was not particularly heavy and that there was nothing special if two workmen carried it bypassing the shop floors within Plant. Although we, personally, had never observed such a picture because dollies were a usual means of transportation for the purpose.

When to Club there remained the smaller leg – to pass by the Smithy Shop Floor, the All-Plant Bath House, the Fire Brigade building, the Oxygen Tank Filling Station and the Medical Center, Skully raced up from the Mechanical Shop Floor to inform that Borya Sakoon sent after us and if we didn't show up we'd be fired.

That was some news, our Overseer at the Experimental Unit never came up with so fiery threats. Could it happen the Head of the Criminal Investigation Department came on another visit?

So we rested the sheet against the smoky wall of the Smithy Shop Floor under the marble tablet screwed to the bricks to announce that in 1967, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Power, there was embedded a message to the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant workers who would work there in

the year of the centennial anniversary of the Great October Revolution. Making sure that our sheet did not interfere with the traffic, we went to the Repair Shop Floor.

Borya was raging way more furiously than Fantômas himself – where the heck we two been paddling when the whole Experimental Unit was sent to Harvesting?.

Yes, Harvesting was not a thing to shrug away. It was like parading the entire workforce of the Experimental Unit. That was the moment when everyone was engaged in earnest, to the utmost.

All the locksmiths from the Experimental Unit, in full collection, with the paper slip of order listing the required materials and quantities, were making for the Central Warehouse. There, behind the All-Plant Bath House, heaps of rebar rods of divers diameter, by heaps of metal fittings of powerful profiles, by heaps of pipes with the cross-section of no less than 10 centimeters were piled crisscross by the railway track.

Soon after, the workmen were joined by a dolly-car, and then along the tracks about the Central Warehouse, a stocky railway crane would roll to their group and hover the dangling steel cables of its beam over the tangled heaps and hills of all those piles of metal.

Two of the most experienced workers, equipped with steely breakers, would noose the pipes, rebars or channels named in the paper slip. The rest of the congregation, keeping a reasonably safe distance, would profusely share their sage advice and agitated comments. At last, the crane would strenuously yank the snapped bunch of metal, pull it up and, with scraping screech, tear out from the heap of iron jumbled with all the previous Harvestings by representatives of different shop floors.

The catch would then be lowered onto the waiting dolly-car. The Ware House employee would compare the approximate amount of the cargo with the figures scribbled in the order and give his "go ahead". Returning from a safe distance, the dolly-car driver would drive it to the Repair Shop Floor, scraping, on the way, the asphalt of the paths with dangling ends of rebars, or pipes or whatever else was there in the paper slip. The locksmiths of the Experimental Unit would start back to the Repair Shop Floor in one, cheerful, monolithic mass, proud of the fulfilled duty…

And now the coming back harvesters appeared from the Mechanical Shop Floor aisle, yet we were not among them. We failed to attend the holy rite of Harvesting. Fortunately, our Overseer had a kinda soft sport for Vladya because of having the mutual last name, even though without being relatives, and we again slipped from the Experimental Unit directly to our sheet under the memorial tablet.

The Manager of the Repair Unit by the Repair Shop Floor, Mozgovoy, stood next to it eyeing the plywood avidly and swallowing his managerial saliva. Of course, such a material would whet anyone's appetite. We clawed our prey like two winning vultures.

"Where to?" asked, in pain, Mozgovoy in his plaintive falsetto.

"To the Plant Management," said, casually, Vladya and we dragged the sheet in the direction of the Main Check-Entrance next to the backside of the Club building that substituted—for the stretch of its length—the wall around Plant.

The back door, sure thing, was not locked. We dragged the sheet in and leaned it against the bunch of canvas-covered frames opposite the movie list painters' room…

When after work we came to Club to move the plywood to our room, the crisp-curled House Manager, Stepan, was already wheeling round and about our sheet. By so deficit material, anyone could be tempted into improper dreams and plans, even a do-nothing, who in all of his life did not hold in his fatty hands anything heavier than his personal bunch of keys. Which is not about Stepan though, who once was a good carpenter they said, it's about the Director of Club, who stood by and tinkled his keys hallooing Stepan to our trophy. Don't rub the soap to your cheeks, Pavel Mitrofanovich, it's not your shaving day, as ran a winged Settlement byword rather popular at those days…

~ ~ ~

The winter broke out somehow straightaway, the snowdrifts piled high up as if they always were there... Before the dances, I went to pick up Olga. She introduced me to the *khutta*'s elders and betters who turned so glad and full of invitations to take my coat off, get seated and have a drink, but, no, thank you, I still had to work that night and it was time for us to leave. So Olga got dressed and we left.

Yet, it was a bit early for Club because we weren't moving the equipment from the stage and only locked the Mirror Hall after the dances. To pass the spare time, we visited the bench by the oil storage Base. Olga had a bottle of wine in her bag and we drank it, not too much though just to tone up in general as well as to get warm. And then we went to Club treading the crunchy snow crust tightened by the traffic's tires and treds in the passers'-by footwear…

Already at night, moonless and dark, yet with the myriads of bright star-specks pricking the sky everywhere, we came to revise the unfinished bottle of red wine stashed away in the snowdrifts... The wine felt too cold for making you warm, and as tasteless as ice. We scarcely drank half of what was still there and had a smoke.

Then I unbuttoned my coat, she unbuttoned hers and got seated in my lap. We had already used to treat each other as personal property. I might freely run my hand deep into her pantyhose to reach the convex concavity item which I missed on the crazy cuckoo's night. She, in her turn, casually undid my belt and unbuttoned the fly for a comfortable grip at my boner.

Everything went on in the usual groove with long, like a protracted dive into another dimension, kisses blended in. But, all of a sudden, there happened something of which I couldn't understand what or how but only that it was somewhere else... where I got into... out of myself... and mingling with... the fusion grew firmer with each push... no I remained anymore just we... we... we... and nothing else... unmakeoutable... doesn't matter... and all's swimming... blurred with blindfolding mist... what's that?. What?!. Oh, no!. More!.

The connection was lost. The night slowly emerged back from nowhere... the snowdrifts... the bench... there again... A couple of thrusts after the elusive new world showed there was nothing to sustain, to return, to keep on with.

We broke apart becoming her and me again. Stunned, I stood up.

That same bulb from up its post. Winks of sparks from the snowdrifts around. The black sky in pin-pricks of stars...

When no one would think of thinking...

Where's my hat? Dammit, wherever be it can wait...

November 17... 17-year-old locksmith apprentice… lost his virginity...

And she?

> (...I do not know until now.
>
> It does not matter.
>
> Who cares?.)

Saying goodbye to her, so quaintly quiet, by the *khutta* of her aunt, I realized that now it was my duty to be stronger than she and I did not have to give much thought to anything else, from now and forever and ever.

> (...Here! Here! Wow!
>
> I can present ideas in a pretty form, can I?
>
> Subsequently though... Decades after...)

The following evening I came to the Evening School of Working Youth where Olga at times attended classes because Aunt Nina pressed for the paper about her finishing eighth grade.

After the break bell, she went out into the corridor and left with me skipping the rest of the classes. I saw Olga to her aunt's *khutta* following her heated report about the record-making bleeding she had the previous night.

> (...as if it means anything.
>
> What's the point in all the maidenheads, circumcisions, adulteries and faithfulness forever and a day?
>
> ***"What was – is no more, for good.***

What is – flows away thru clenched fingers.

What is to come – can't be avoided...)

It was not possible, of course, for our love affair to melt the ice and snow of the winter all around us, yet all the winter snow and ice could not suppress our flaming ardor. Moreover, we fanned the passion's flame at the least opportunity.

The snow-clad bench by the oil storage Base was soon rejected because of its unwanted backrest... The sheet-iron trailer by the tiny ice rink in the Plant Park was more convenient, but it took an unbearably long stretch of time waiting until the bros would finish their wine, then go thru their atomic reports to each other about what kind and which dosage of alcohol they consumed earlier on that day and which circumstances led to having it in their current composition, concluding the brag session with argumentative punches at each other's mug (without drawing the knife though), before they, at last, dispersed.

Drawing the knife when Kolyan was around, a bro could just as well kiss it goodbye before the inexorably pending confiscation... Kolyan O' Settlement was a specimen of the increasingly scanty breed of heroes. Not too large an exemplar though, he was only 1 meter and 80, and utterly laconic. On the other hand, he didn't really need to flash eloquence because a fleeting glance at those fists about 20 kilos each was enough to dry up any wish for odd discussions. Even for a dumbo repeatedly surprised with a sandbag on his conk from around the corner, it was immediately clear that Kolyan would make a toast of him in less than 6 secs flat. Among the bros, of course, he could say a thing or 2, only you had to sit on a sufficient stock of patience while waiting till his words were out, after all.

Admittance to the trailer was granted us because he miscalculated me for a champion-bro in a specific line which irrevocable mistake he entertained since my "engagement" with Olga back in summer as we just started going out together.

One evening starting off to the Plant Park, I spruced my little finger up with a ring cajoled out of my sister. A casual tawdry fake it was with a splinter of glass or something. Rather reluctantly, Natasha farmed it out after I swore it was just for that one time.

In the Plant Park, Olga and I climbed up to the projectionist booth in the summer cinema whose key was obtained from the younger projectionist, Grisha Zaychenko. The moment she saw the ring on my little finger, Olga clung tighter than a leaf from the sauna whisker in the steam-room: who gave me that?

Borrowed from Kiddy, said I, my younger sister.

With outright disbelief, Olga demanded the thing for a closer inspection. Hardly had I passed the ring when she clapped it on her finger, some other than the little one though.

Okay, says I, that was enough for showing off and let her give it back for I had promised Natasha to return, it was, like, from her boyfriend.

At that point, Olga took heed and tried to take the ring off but – no go! She twirled, and pulled, and spat at the darn thing to no avail, the ring snapped real tight on. The date turned into a dungeon torture session until she somehow managed to force it over her finger joint.

When, at last, I shoved the cursed ring into my hip-pocket, we were not fit for kisses and stuff with Olga's finger hurt and swollen and me feeling sorry for her. So I locked the booth and we left...

Now, Kolyan at that same period was picking up steam in the ticket office together with the Plant Park watchman, and he observed who it was coming down from above. And what could he possibly have thought, if from the booth portholes, for some half-hour the female moans were floating over the entire summer cinema?

"Oh, my! Mmmm! Ouu! Ay!"

That's why, he kinda thought: where, in such a small...well.. thing...could it...sort of...be sitting? In a word, he respected me as a bro hero, only from another branch.

And for all those reasons, coming on a visit to the sheet-iron trailer and having sat in heated expectation thru the ongoing stupid debates of the present booby jerks on that it was high time to kick the ass of the Peace Square hippies who lately had become way too hippy, and when at last they'd free the premises of their presence happy with their being such cool goons, we still had to wait until Kolyan would finish his endless explanation as to where...well...to...kinda put...the key...well...of...sort of...the trailer...

The warmest feelings were left by the long sheepskin coat of Aunt Nina in which Olga once ventured from the *khutta* wicket. We descended into the snow-filled Grove with the patches of smooth hard ice of the frozen Swamp and it was good, but, as always, not enough…

~ ~ ~

At Plant, the term of our apprentice training expired and we began to get the payment of 70 rubles a month – almost as much as other locksmiths. Now, cutting the iron with a chisel, we no longer hammer-squashed our fingers and we (the hairy yobbos) were even trusted with the manufacture of an experimental product from scratch... It's interesting.

We scrutinized the intangible speculative thought turned into the visual lines of blue-prints specked with countless figures to indicate dimension. Observing those figures, we asked the gas cutter to cut the necessary pieces out from 20 mm-thick sheet iron, asked the marker to delineate the contours, asked the planer to scratch odd metal off to the markings, asked the welder to weld this one to that, and that to another...

Why so many requests? Well, because everyone's busy, sort of… Sometimes from the request to its execution, it took weeks of waiting, or go and ask once again…

And—lo!—the skeleton of the product-in-progress on the deck-rack outta the Repair Shop Floor grew with the added assemblage parts, began to gradually acquire engaging looks. Overseer ceased to call us "hairy yobbos" at every turn, and the Experimental Unit locksmiths drop the stale joke about the launch date of our "Lunokhod-2", aka Lunar Rover.

At that point Manager of the Experimental Unit ordered to deliver the already thoroughly-smeared cardboard folder with the multitude of blue-prints to Yasha and Mykola-the-old letting the more skilled workforce finalize the disembodied technical idea in weighty tangibility... It hurts.

The following product was simply ruined by us... Using lots of material, we assembled the massive stand "Glory to Labor!" on the deck-rack and called Borya Sakoon to assess the accomplished work before erecting it on the square in front of the Main Check-Entrance. The overseer looked thru the blueprints and said something was wrong though he couldn't put the finger on it.

Engineer-Technologist climbed down from the Shop Floor Management Office above the locker room and joined Borya's negative appraisal – yes, something was certainly amiss, not quite the thing. However, neither separately nor together, they could tell exactly what's not right, even after checking the dimensions of the manufactured monument with a tape measure.

The author of the ill-starred project was called from the Design Bureau by the Plant Management. And it took a while even for him to discover the reason. We faithfully preserved all the subtleties of his idea and executed it in metal without any deviations except for producing the mirrored reflection of the blueprints. The product was cut to pieces and the square remained without the prospective architectural beautification…

After the New Year, a special team was sent from the Experimental Unit to the construction site of a feed mill in the village of Semyanovka. The team comprised three locksmiths: Mykola-the-young, Vasya, and me, under command of Borya Sakoon, our Overseer.

On the first morning, as we started off to Semyanovka under the tarp top over the truck bed, there was dreadful ice on the roads. The truck driver drove very slowly not to slide and follow the suite of those vehicles whose drivers had lost control on the ice, and they loomed now, here and there, with their wheels up in the dense fog wrapping the roadside. And we cautiously puttered on thru eerie stillness and flowing fog waves that muffled the sound of the truck engine. Some panorama of the concluding stage in the Stalingrad Battle for you…

The feed mill was a gray building of three sections, at a half-kilometer off the village, surrounded from all the sides by a chilly silent field of weather-beaten snow.

The boiler room did not work, we had to bore the wall yet, with breakers, to lay pipes thru. Frosty iron sides of numb bunkers and mute conveyor-belts filled the space in the other half-dark section.

For two weeks we went there to knock steel against steel at walloping the walls and rigging the conveyor belts, or to doze over the red-hot electrical spiral in the boiler room with its frost-coated walls.

At one of such soft snoozes, a sharp awl tip pierced my brain. Starting up from pain to the jubilant guffaw from Vasya's happy snout, I noticed a piece of smoldering cotton dropped on the floor, whose bitter smoke had penetrated thru my nostrils to give the unbearable sensation... Overseer and Mykola also laughed, but not as gleefully as Vasya, that stupid dickhead or, to put it limpidly, the fucking 30-year-old miscarriage. No wonder, my Uncle Vadya was never tired to recite his favorite chant, “Heroes are what Homeland needs, yet Cunt keeps turning out morons...”

One day Mykola brought raw potatoes from a solitary clamp in the field and we undertook baking them just to have some pastime. Borya sent me to collect the pieces of crushed boards remaining on the site after they finished construction works. Mykola and Vasya fetched a couple armfuls of some straw to the unfinished weigh-bridge section for kindling the bonfire with the firewood fetched by me.

The gate to the section, with one of its wings removed from the hinges, could not ward off the wind which kept breaking in and swerved the smoke whichever way it fancied. We stood around the fire in the chilly gusts that tore inside from the white field under the gray sky, when Overseer remarked, "In four years I will retire but this here latata would not get ready yet." He threw a "Prima" stub into the fire and went into the section’s corner to blind the walls with a welding electrode set a-crackling.

What a beautiful word "latata", I have never heard anyone calling potatoes that way… Now, Borya started playing with the electric welding, Vasya went over to hold the pipe pieces for him to weld up and by the dismal fire there remained only Mykola and I with our shoulders rolled up, noses wrinkled, eyes at a squint from the smart smoke. Some boring party...

Then, grabbing the piece of chalk which we brought along with us to mark the lengths of pipe when cutting it up, I started drawing on the gate wing leaned against its shut counterpart. I did it bit by bit and tried to do my level best, there was plenty of time before the truck would come to take us home.

Perhaps, that was the most successful drawing in my entire life, almost of natural dimensions, with thorough attention to the details. Nu, of course... Hips, yummy breasts, long hair streaming over the shoulders to fall behind the back, the captivating triangle and tempting call "Come! Fuck me!" in the look of her eyes from under partly dropped eyelids. Wow! Nothing to add to nor remove from.

However, the piece of chalk had not been finished off yet. So, I used it for block letters next to the nude beauty. "BORYA, I AM WAITING FOR YOU!."

Then I went to the fire because the wind had thoroughly chilled the feet of the artist absorbed in his creative efforts. Mykola stood there too and giggled gazing at the seductive creature.

At that moment, Borya Sakoon took his face out the black box of his welder mask and traced Mykola's stare back to the gate wing. No Stanislavsky system would ever reproduce the facial expression acquired by Borya's mug a moment later. "Who?!."

Mykola and I stood by the fire pretending naive ignorance of reasons for the emotional outburst which shattered the Overseer's soul.

As for Vasya, squatted next to Overseer to hold the workpiece pipe with both hands, his stare was quite impartially dropped down but, at the same time, Vasya's piggy snout turned into a stubby index finger and pointed at me like the compass needle who knows where North is.

"Bitch!." The innate instinct for self-preservation did its job, and I sprinted to the conveyors' section ahead of the pipe-length tinkling along the cemented floor after me.

Why, of so too many foul words in Borya's lexicon, did he give preference to "bitch!"? To uphold the tradition of thieves-in-law? Good luck he'd never been trained at gorodki game…

I came back ten minutes later. The word "BORYA" was slavishly effaced from the gate wing with Vasya's work mitt. The rest was left as is. The hand of vandals dared not destroy the masterpiece…

~ ~ ~

We played in the Mirror Hall, aka Ballet Studio Gym. Lekha sat at the Yonika, Skully – behind his "kitchen", Chuba, in a dormant stupor, glued his vacant gaze at nothing in the middle of the dimly lit Hall while picking sluggishly the strings of his bass guitar.

It was a slow-tempo number, the "white dance" for girls to pick their partners. Vladya's girlfriend Raya had invited and led him off into the mass of dancers to have hugs in the slow floating waves of light specks from the mirror splinters in the ball spinning overheads.

In the right corner of the small stage, leaning my behind against the lowered fallboard of the upright piano, I strummed the chords of the rhythm-guitar part. Behind the piano, Olga stood with her arms folded over its top board and bored she was. "Kiss me," demanded she from behind the piano.

I turned my head to the left and, over my shoulder and the black upright thing between us, merged into a long kiss with her warm soft lips. My fingers knew without me when to go to the next chord...

With the public kiss over, I modestly turned my face down to my guitar to regain the normal breathing and heard the shocked exclamation from Olga, "Oy! Mother!"

Her stifled cry signaled that the end of Heorot was at the gate... Midst the gooey hugs and swoony swaying of the dancers, like a rigid rock stood and watched her her mother who had unexpectedly arrived from the Crimea to take Olga back to Theodosia down there…

And from another end of our boundless, vast Homeland, from another port city in another sea, The Spitzbergen band arrived in Konotop from the Murmansk city to start playing dances at Loony, as arranged with Loony's Director, Bohmstein.

We were undone by The Spitzes in a fortnight. Two weeks later, the Mirror Hall at Club was empty because the dancing crowd spurted to the dances in Loony, to the concert hall on the second floor, which used to be the listing for CJR competitive battles, and now, freed of all the audience seats, was turned into a parquet ballroom.

However, not the parquet became the decisive point. The restaurant band from Murmansk, made up of 4 musicians of 20-to-25 years old, came with the Western instruments and rock-group equipment available in port cities, including the organ of the "Roland" brand, and (most importantly) they sang. Moreover, they sang into professional microphones producing the echo effect. "One!.. un!.. un! Two!.. oo!.. oo!"

The Orpheuses with their homemade stuff went kaput. Yes, there still remained concerts in Club, "playing trash" but the dances just faded out…

Olga's both mother and unregistered stepfather left Konotop taking along her most solemn oath of coming back to Theodosia in two weeks, yet The Spitzes got firmly anchored in the city...

End February, I saw Olga off in a train leaving from Platform 4. She boarded the last car, the conductor locked the thick iron door and went inside. When the starting jerk pulled the car, Olga waved to me thru the door glass.

Grabbing the handrails by the sides of the locked door I jumped onto the steps under it. The train was quickly gaining speed, she freaked out and frantically cried behind the glass I could not hear what, as if I did not know what I was doing. I jumped off at the very end of the platform, because farther on you could indeed break a leg or two against the rails, and the crossties half-buried in the gravel…

In March I sent her a letter. It was very romantic stuff of how above the locksmith vise at my workplace I was seeing the heavenly features of her dear face.

No, I didn't copy the lines from Pushkin, but the essence and spirit were the same, and only the lexicon was upgraded for a century-and-a-half. In the opinion of the locksmiths at the Experimental Unit by the Repair Shop Floor, such a letter could be written by only a total cuntsucker. They had not read it though, neither had she because the letter did not find her in Theodosia. Olga returned to Konotop to inform me that she was pregnant…

At those rational days of planned economy and growing concern of the Soviet Government and the Leadership of the CPSU about the needs of population, condoms could be purchased even at news stalls, three kopecks apiece. Yet, for me a condom was just a word from the dirty jokes folklore, and I had no idea what "protective care" was about. Then she took the pill and everything got off easy…

Spring came early, amicable and warm... In mid-April, I started the "dacha" season of sleeping in the lean-to. I swept it and moved the mattress and blanket to the iron bed that spent the winter over there.

The same evening in the Plant Park, I invited Olga to "my place". She easily agreed. All the way from the Plant Park to Nezhyn Street I was walking on clouds. We strolled in the dark, tightly holding each other at the waist. Thru the yard of the Turkovs' *khutta* and the back garden, under the sole window in the ours, we sneaked into the lean-to, and I latched the door.

In the breaks between the rounds, I, obedient to Valle-Inclan's commandment, was restoring the equality between my "hands that knew already everything and the eyes that hadn't had a single glimpse yet…" for which purpose, I lit up matches, one by one, and stopped her shy tries to screen the glimmer of her body emerging from the darkness in the flicker of a tiny torch...

We woke up at dawn and walked thru the deafening silence and strangeness of empty streets to the *khutta* of her girlfriend Sveta so that Olga would have an alibi for her Aunt Nina. On my way back I met the first pedestrian of the breaking day. It was past Bazaar, the man was walking in the counter direction along the other side of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street…

I was fine with her, yet I wanted to get rid of our affair. Firstly, not always it was really good. The time when we went to the Seim and I spread her in the Willow thicket, everything turned out somehow flat and not exactly the thing.

We, certainly, rehabilitated ourselves later, when she invited me to the shower at her workplace. Yes, she had already got a job in the city and was delivering telegrams from the Main Post-Office.

> (...it is hard to believe, but even way back in the 1970s, in absence of as yet undreamed of mobile phones, people still managed to survive.
>
> Telegrams helped to do the trick. They were delivered on the post-office blanks with the glue-mounted paper ribbons from a telegraph machine which had printed the words, "come Friday ten Moscow-Kiev car seven".
>
> The telegram messages conveyed the raw core of information because you had to pay for each word in it and for each punctuation mark, including the address of the person to whom it was sent... Alms are the insurmountable coach at the laconic style.

But if you had money to burn then, of course, you could write in full – "I AM ARRIVING ON FRIDAY BY THE TRAIN MOSCOW-KIEV AT 10 AM IN THE CAR NUMBER SEVEN PERIOD", and then even add in the end – "I LOVE YOU FOREVER COMMA MY DEAR PERIOD"

And the workers from the Main Post-Office would bring the telegram in their tiny black on-duty handbag, "Sign here on the receipt, please."...)

She ended her work at five, and we met by the five-story hotel "The Seagull" paneled with yellowish stone tiles. On the wide porch beside the entrance to the hotel, there were two more glass doors: The Inter-City Telephone Communication Station, and The Main Post-Office.

We left the porch and Olga led me to the The Main Post's service entrance on the back of the building. She entered first and went ahead alone to the far end in the long corridor, where she turned around and beaconed me. Some doors stood open and there were women sitting with their backs to me, in front of their windows in the glass partitions that separated them from the lined customers.

We descended into a wide basement hall with long low windows overhead and beneath them a row of shower stalls alongside the wall. Entering one of the stalls, we undressed and Olga turned the hot water on.

(...in the mid-90's the scene in the shower, starring Sylvester Stallone and Sharon Stone in some action movie, was declared the hottest Hollywood erotic of the year.

But they plagiarized it from our visit to the Main Post-Office! Twenty years later.

And now they tell me there was no sex in the USSR. Yes, there was!

Only the term for it sounded differently...)

At the end of our hot f-f...er...well, I mean… scene… there was a certain moment that Hollywood never dare to shoot. That is when along Olga's white taut thigh, in between droplets and paths of the running hot water, there crept two-three whitish-roiled spits... I had certainly seen that frame before but could not put my finger on where exactly... Yes, I became "protective careful" already.

(...a superficial pulp-fiction-founded self-education may often give rise to grave misconceptions.

For a long time, I entertained an erroneous opinion that 'masturbation' stood exclusively for sedulous handwork—chafing your cock until you cum. But, no!. As it turned out, even in the Old Testament there was a geezer named Onan, who regularly watered the earth floor in his tent with his seed at the concluding stage of, otherwise normal, sexual intercourse. The final chord, so to speak.

> That chord was (using the term by *lahboohs*, aka musicians) just "a stinky clam", absolutely out of tune, yet served a means of protective care to prevent unwanted conception...)

And, secondly, I was freaked out by Olga's first pregnancy and feared a repetition – who would care? I did not want to get tied up in wedlock, and one dark night on the porch of Sveta's *khutta*, I even gave it a try at ridding of the delightful cause of the unwanted effect.

I told her that it was time for us to part. She started crying, "Why?."

I lit a cigarette, "We must do it. I have met another."

"Who?! Tell me her name!"

"You wouldn't know her."

"But tell me!"

"Well...in short...some...well...Sveta."

"Where does she live?"

"Nigh the gypsies' block."

"You lie!"

"No, I don't."

And I lit the second cigarette from the stub of the first, as in Italian black-and-white movies, though I did not want to smoke at all, the second one tasted too bitter and even disgusting. I smoked half of it, felt nauseated and gave up. It was the surrender to both of them: I could not finish off the cigarette, neither could I manage to break up with Olga. The following week, she announced that she was pregnant again and no longer had the pill…

I called my parents to come to the lean-to because we had to talk. They came in, wary and silent, unaccustomed to such invitations.

I sat on the chair under the glassed frame by the head of the bed. Mother remained standing at the opposite siderails of the empty bed, only leaned against them. Father stood next to her with his hand resting on the long box-workbench alongside the blind wall. Then and there, I announced that I had to marry Olga.

"How that to marry?" asked Mother.

"As a noble man of quality, I am obliged to marry her," clarified I, uneasy that the delicate bare-bone "have to" proved not as graspable as expected.

My parents exchanged wordless glances, Father shook his head, Mother responded his clue with a silent sigh. Then they sat down on the bed, side by side, and started a detailed discussion on how we were going to organize the noble man's wedding…

~ ~ ~

When I and Olga submitted to the city ZAGS the application stating our wish to get married, they gave us the paper for Bridal Salons so that we could buy nuptial tackle at a discount. In Konotop, there was such a salon behind the Central Park of Recreation, however, all they had there was nothing but two dust-coated mannequins of bride and groom with separate blank gazes from out their narrow cage of a shop window. We had to go to Kiev... Lekha Kuzko went with us as an expert, because he had already gone thru all of that when marrying Tatyana, and learned places. In Kiev, we bought rings, the one for Olga was a little yellower, but that of mine – wider. We also bought new shoes for me, and a white silk mini dress for Olga, as well as the wedding veil.

A month later our marriage was registered in Loony. The Hall of Celebrations was on the same floor with the ballroom only in the opposite wing. For the ceremony, we arrived in a hired taxi. At the entrance to the Hall of Celebrations, we were met with loud electric music by the guys "playing trash". I knew the guitarist with a long deep scar in his cheek playing a red Iolanta. He watched me with rounded, not understanding, eyes and shrugged... Ah! To hell! Makes no difference... I never was good at football anyway…

A woman in a dark dress, with glasses and permanent curls in her bob-cut hair, read to Olga and me the rights and responsibilities of a young family, which was a cell in our Soviet society. We signed the form, Lekha and Sveta seconded.

"That is all,

Say "bye!" to dreams..."

The trash playing band broke out with Mendelssohn's march, and a photographer from the photo studio across the road shot us with his camera on the tripod. In the picture ready a week later, there was a hairy yobbo with a not too happy smile and the guiltily scrunched collar of the jacket from the last year's graduation suit. But Olga turned out nicely, only somewhat sad in her face. Probably, she did not want to get tied up at her sweet sixteen…

The music at the wedding party was played by The Orpheuses, for free, sure thing, it was not a playing trash occasion. A couple of boards sealed Zhoolka up in his kennel so that in the circle of ground cleared of grass with the chain he dragged after him throughout his dog's life, they'd put the instruments and the equipment.

Between the stack of brittle bricks and the sectioned shed, there was set up a long table, parallel to both, in the shade of the two age-old American Maples.

Olga and I sat with our backs to the fence of the Turkovs' yard. Two kitchen chairs under us were coupled into one seat by spreading over them the Father's turned inside-out sheepskin coat with long wisps of fleece, not overly golden but black and maroon anyway.

Around the table there sat the Arkhipenkos, Uncle Vadya with his wife whose Adoptee he was, Olga's mother, Maria, who arrived from the Crimea with her eldest daughter, Vita, Aunt Nina and Uncle Kolya, some nondescript relatives of Solodovnikovs, the immediate and more distant neighbors from Nezhyn Street, the Kreepaks, the Plaksins, the Kozhevnikovs, Vladya's mother Galina Petrovna, and all sorts of close friends either to the newly-weds or to the musicians, as well as flying parties of the Settlement bros, always ready to drink for free...

The wedding party rambled on till late at night, under the light of a couple of bulbs fixed up in the Maples.

They chanted "Bitter! Bitter!" for me and Olga to stand up and kiss each other while they would count loudly how long we kept the kiss.

Father, together with Olga's mother, was put into a handcart and shoot in it along the street (Maria was not quite happy with that ancient beautiful folk custom).

Quak bared himself to the waist and danced holding aloft the large ax which he grabbed from the lean-to, but Uncle Kolya started to clap in time as if he also was a rocker and, seizing a moment, took the ax from the merry Viking. The Settlement bros dragged Quak to his *khutta* because he was all mops and brooms already, while Skully kept copulating with Glushcha's sister in the most primeval posture, under the gloomy Elm in the back garden.

In short, quite a normal wedding it was, in style to the classic canons and traditions of the Settlement…

Already after the midnight, Olga and I retired to our lean-to conjugal bedchamber... To commence the nuptials, I first had to tidy the place scraping Quak's vomit by the door with a shovel and sweeping out the cigarette butts left by Olga's girlfriends smocking in privacy. If I imagined beforehand that friendly openness might run into so a callous inconsideration I'd better hang a padlock on the door.

Even the tape in the tape-recorder was obviously played, wound and rewound from the particular place with the erotic French song, which I was fixin' to switch on as the background for Consummation of Marriage. Hopeless to find it in a snap, and in a way of ad-hoc solution to regain so meticulously arranged but sabotaged first-wedding-night musical back-drop, I just switched the tape on from the very beginning—the song eventually would get played anyway—but as we finished the mentioned consummation it turned out that the brown mass of the tight wound tape had collected on the right reel and ticked its empty flips by, next to the stilled reel on the left... I somehow missed enjoying those erotic grunts by Brigitte Bardot.

Then over the tin roof of the lean-to, a heavy shower clattered pouring down on it and onto the long leaves of corn crowding in its plot up to the glazed frame wide open into the night garden outside, and we just lay clasped in a tight embrace and it was good…

Our honeymoon coincided with my vacation from Plant. The first squabble happened on the third day of our married life. I was sitting in the yard deciphering sheet-music of some Spanish guitar piece. Olga walked past from the *khutta* to the lean-to and called me along.

I still picked strings for a minute or two, no more, before coming. She was on the bed shedding tears because I did not need her nor paid any attention: was that the right way to treat wives?

So I had to iron out my wrong-doing in the most effective, as far as I know, way, though I still couldn't get it what was my guilt.

> (...and only by now I have figured it out that so works the female instinct for self-preservation, "If you have already got me, then who do you keep practicing that fucking guitar for?"
>
> However, quite possibly, that even now I don't understand them right...)

~ ~ ~

Lekha Kuzko brought the blissful news – we were to play dances at the KEMZ Plant Palace of Culture, he had arranged it.

I was delighted because there's no life without playing dances. Besides, when Olga and I were coming to dances at Loony and they kicked up a fight on the dance-floor there, I feared of accidental harm to her belly, although it was not noticeable yet.

The dances at KEMZ were attended by a crowd from neighborhoods too distant from Loony. Although The Spitzes played better music than we, yet long waiting for a streetcar after their dances would cure any melomania. And even some bros from the Settlement began to show up at the KEMZ Palace of Culture. People like to join familiar crowds…

Vladya and Chuba were drafted into the army. Sur, a neighbor of Chuba's, being still a tenth-grader, stepped into his shoes as the bass guitarist.

A guy from Zagrebelya, handled Fofik, started to sing with us. He sported long curly hair and showed slight vestiges of speech problems in his childhood which, probably, accounted for his babyish handle. Fofic's crowning number was the song by Makarevitch from "Time machine" group.

> ***"I drink to those who're at the sea now..."***

Nothing of a lisp or stutter here. And another one, about an American pilot, shot down in the sky over Vietnam.

"My F-4 as fast as a bullet..."

(...only recently I found out that was a Russian adaptation of the "Secret Service Man" of Mel Tormé which he sang back in the '50s.

In music, they always were ahead of us...)

One night Olga got with her kisses to my dick, and I yawped, "No need for a wafflister wife!"

She shrunk back, and I immediately regretted my idiocy. Moron! Why? It was so good!. And what hurts most of all, the words were out before I even knew they were there, that sudden yell surprised me too, not allowed any stretch for thinking over... but fixed me into the crowd of stupid seminarians

When it became too cold in the lean-to, we moved into the *khutta*, on the couch in the kitchen. Each night, I tightly closed the double-leaf door between the kitchen and the room where slept my parents, and my brother and sister. Not because we were having sex every night, but so that they did not guess on what night we were at it…

At the dances in KEMZ Olga seldom danced, the belly became too big but the rock'n'rollers jumped around without ever heeding where to. And her light brown mini coat became too small for fastening any lower than by the two upper buttons.

Once she began to cry at night that I completely fell out of love with her. But that was not true, I felt sorry for her and wanted to protect from everything. Olga cried and cried until she made me make love to her. And it was good, only I tried to be very careful so as not to hurt the belly in any way. Four days later Olga gave birth to my first daughter, Lenochka…

Children are the flowers of life until they wake up.

"All the day you cried and cried

With your mouth open wide,

No more crying by my side

Or I'll throw you outside!"

Although hardly blessed with a stupefying volume, Olga's tits kept turning out milk in more than enough quantities. The surplus outpour, not consumed by the baby, had to be milked off into a glazed cup. And, of course, she didn't get off my back until I agreed to try the product. Well, tastes differ and stuff, there's no use to argue, but what the heck do them those silly babies find in it? Pasteurized milk is much better…

Aunt Nina said that the child must be baptized and we took Lenochka to a *khutta* nearby School 12, at the address given by Olga's aunt. There were many people crowding in the yard. On the

whole, it was a church though without the cross on its roof, sort of an underground temple. But inside it was a commonplace *khutta* only without a single piece of furniture. The baby was taken out of the envelope, sprinkled hastily so as to make her howl in protestation, and presented with a small cross on a string.

I forgot even to think about the holy event, yet at the end of January Lyonya, Manager of the Experimental Unit and also the Komsomol Head of the Repair Shop Floor called all the younger locksmiths up to the Management Office after work for a Komsomol meeting.

There he announced that he was informed by the City Komsomol Committee that I had been to church and baptized my child for which breach of Komsomol ethics the present meeting should pronounce a reprimand to me, as a renegade member.

Everyone voted "pro" at once to cut the meeting short and go home but, leaving hurriedly, expressed their condolence to me for not getting expelled from the organization completely, which lucky outcome would cancel another ten years of their keeping Komsomol contributions from my wages.

As I learned later, the priest baptizer each month was handing in the list of visitors to his crossless church-*khutta*. That's some underground clergyman for you… But then, so, probably, were their conditions for letting him function at all.

~ ~ ~

And in February I ran into a huger penalty... Lekha Kuzko was going then to the city of Korosten to bring electric guitars for the KEMZ Palace of Culture, and I wanted to go with him. That morning I climbed up to the Management Office and asked to let me go, but they told me to wait for the CEO of the Repair Shop Floor.

When Lebedev's black greatcoat showed up in the Mechanical Shop Floor aisle, I went out to meet him. However, at so early an hour, his back was not straightened up to the proper degree or else he'd kept it overly upright the day before but all he managed to mumble at the moment was "no".

Then I saw red and just left, because I hadn't changed yet into my *spetzovka*. Yet, as it turned out, Lekha was already gone to Korosten.

In short, I got "absence from work" for that day and the CEO of the Repair Shop Floor gave out the order about transferring me to a lower-paid position as a workman at the Smithy Shop Floor for the extent of three months.

"You'd better use the wood to make the coffins for yourself

Because the penal battalions are going to attack..."

In the Smithy Shop Floor, instead of the remorseless wail of machine-tools, there thundered hydraulic hammers sending tremor thru the asphalt floor and the everlasting fire roared violently bursting in the furnaces where black iron slugs got heated to the scarlet whiteness. The howling of hefty fans thru the grates of their rounded boxes was also a mighty part in the score.

Such fans had a meter wide sweep of their blades and were it to catch a reckless hand… Well, that's the reason for those muzzle-gratings...

In a word, you couldn't find a better place for improving your vocal skills. Shout at the top of your lungs and no one would ever hear you. Even I couldn't hear myself but still kept yelling:

"Oh, Mommy,

Oh, Mommy-Mommy blues,

Oh, Mommy blues..."

But my yelling exercises went on only while my partner Borya was learning how much we were to load on that day.

Borya was a penal workman, like me, for violation of labor discipline, yet he was native there, a smith from the Smithy Floor. A blonde over thirty years old, he was not very tall or bulky, you'd hardly think he was a smith. And, in his case, the discipline was violated by being in a state of intoxication at his workplace.

Our job was plain and invariable – loading of steel slugs into the furnaces.

Those slugs waited for us in the left wing of the Smithy Shop Floor building. They were sizable pieces of axes from railway car or locomotive wheel pairs cut up by the gas cutters during the day shift.

The ex-axis pieces were, sure enough, too heavy to be hoisted by a couple of workmen, penalized or not, that’s why there was a ground-operated bridge crane in the wing. I grabbed hold of a piece with the grip donned on the winch hook, and Borya hit the buttons in the hand console hanging from the winch in the bridge crane and forwarded the slug to the trolley where I directed and held in place the descending grip until it opened and let the piece go.

That way we stacked several layers of the slugs, depending on the length of the cut pieces (the longer, the heavier) because the following part of our job was to push the trolley along the narrow gauge track of rails.

We pushed it into the main building, onto the turntable there which looked like a sewer hatch but swerving in its place. Applying our bodies to an end of the loaded trolley, we turned it 90 degrees to the left and rolled on further, towards the furnace.

The most demanding point in the process of slugs transportation was to start a still-standing trolley. That's where you had to exert your sinews in earnest, and when the trolley began to slowly roll on then, Ha! bitch, you're, ours!.

The vent of each furnace was furnished with a wide iron shelf outside. Turning his face away from the fiery heat pouring out the vent, Borya tossed a half-meter-wide tube-roller on the shelf. Then we put onto the roller the oblong spade with raised side edges, which prevented the slugs from rolling off the spade.

That spade had an enormous, five-meter-long, handle made not of iron but of steel with the cross-section of six by four centimeters. The handle ended with the crossbeam for two workmen to grab its halves from each side of the handle.

But first, I held the end alone so that Borya could use the nearby jib crane to hoist a slug from the trolley into the spade, shielding his face from the fire in the furnace with his hunched-up shoulder. Then he turned the crane over back to the trolley, came up to me, and each of us grabbed his half of the crossbeam.

"Hup!"

And we, rubbing shoulders, went three-four wide strides, accelerating to jogging, towards the flaming hell in the furnace. The run ended with a synchronous jump up and sharp push of the crossbeam down with the aggregated weight of our bodies so that the springy handle would transmit the impact to the spade and toss the slug up and out.

On landing after the jump, your face would turn, on its own accord, away from the scorching heat of fire raging in the furnace. That's why Borya worked in the smith's protective tarp apron, and I was finishing off my once-beloved red sweater.

With our necks defensively pulled in, we strode back pulling the shovel after us, and Borya went to hoist the next slug onto it.

"Hither-thither...To and fro…

Ooh!. How good it feels!.."

Then we drove the emptied trolley back to fetch a new batch of slugs... Inside the furnace, they also had to be stacked in layers and rows starting from the deepest, otherwise, they just wouldn't fit in. The more of them loaded inside, the shorter the runs with the shovel…

I didn’t immediately mastered the synchronous jumping, and Borya cursed me with inaudible, behind the rumble and roar, taboo words because the slug wrongly dropped across a layer would fucking fuck your ass when stacking in the following ones from the bunch.

Borya was overly terse. I had more communication with the fan (singing in a duo) than with him. Yet, one time Borya shouted into my ear, "We've done forty tons today!" The red flames from

the furnace reflected in the teeth bared in his pleased smile and the whites of his eyes. Some labor victory!.

Empty worthless bullshit. It's just because we did it.

> ***"You load sixteen tons and what do you get?***
>
> ***Another day older and deeper in debt..."***

We worked two shifts – the second and the third, leaving the first one to the gas cutters for cutting axes to pieces.

On the payday I could hardly believe my eyes – I had earned 120 rubles a month!.

> "...transfer to a lower-paid position..."
>
> ***" Ha-ha, Mr. Lebedev!***
>
> ***Ha-ha! Mr. Heath!***
>
> ***'Cause I'm a workman!***
>
> ***Yea! Yea! Yea!.."***

And to the smiths, the cashier was forking out two-three unopened packs of money in bank wrapping plus stray notes. Over 300 rubles!

Yes, Borya, you'd better cut out boozing at your workplace.

> ***" Hither-thither...To and fro…***
>
> ***Ooh!... How good it feels!.."***
>
> (...I have always been, am, and will be cursing that night when I let out that cry of a stupid seminarian.
>
> Yet, what's said can't be unsaid...)

And Olga again wanted something else... Once, when I was throwing the slugs into her furnace, she started pressing, "Tell it.... what!.. you're doing.... now..."

"I'm...making!.. love...to you!.."

"No!.. tell it...the other!.. way..."

"Which...wa..way?!.."

"You..ou.. know!.. which..."

And I started to moan it out, "I'm...fuc...king...you!.."

"Ah!"

"You'm...fu... cki...ng...I..."

"Oh, my!.."

The dark kitchen. The baby's asleep. And what could it understand anyway…

Another night she called me from the darkness, "Hit me!"

"You crazy?"

"No, I'm not! Hit me!"

Well, at last, she made me lightly slap her cheek.

"Not just so! Hit hard!"

Knowing she'd not get off my back in any way, I meted out a more sonorous slap. She stretched on her back sobbing.

"O, babe! Did it hurt?"

No answer, just quiet sobs. And I had to comfort her in the most effective, as far as I know, way. And it was good…

Then I was lying on my back thinking. Why would she? And so persistently... A slap in the face as the punishment for misconduct?. Some whoever...before me?..without me?..instead of?.

> (...it’s better not to think some thoughts, just leave them alone and, if heedlessly started, they’d better be dropped and not thought down the road to their inevitable conclusions...)

End May the term of my penal exile to the Smithy Shop Floor was over, and that same day I got the draft notice order to report for induction on May 27...

And again there was a feast in our *khutta* yard because in the Settlement traditions seeing-off to the army was almost as great a regale as a wedding.

They all drank and sang, only without The Orpheuses' accompaniment, and Mother was carrying around the table Lenochka in her arms, wrapped in a swaddle over her loose baby shirt. Clasping

her Grandma's gown collar with her tiny fingers, she looked around with her pink lips open in surprise…

The next morning they saw me to the two-story House of the Deaf by the bridge in the railway embankment over Peace Avenue. There were lots of draftees in the caps on their bare-of-hair heads in the thick crowd of seers-off.

Tolik Arkhipenko kept assuring everyone that I would be just fine but nobody listened, my brother smoked in wistful consideration of the skin-headed draftees, Father concentrated on frowning deeply, Mother comforting Olga who sobbed burying her face in my chest...

The draftees were commanded to board two big buses which started to move but, after turning into Peace Avenue, stopped – someone was missing. We went out to the roadside. The crowd of seers-off rushed across Peace Avenue. Olga ran up ahead of all.

She was kissing me with her soft wet lips and pressing to my chest her small soft breasts without a bra under the light summer blouse wet from her tears.

The belated draftee was brought in a car, and we were told to board again. The motor started up. The door slammed and the bus finally, uncompromisingly, and irretrievably moved away carrying us to where the army would make of me a real man and defender of our Soviet Homeland.

~ ~~~ ~

~~~ My Universities: Part One

"And the drill grounds will start shining,

Will get polished with our boots,

Will get crushed to fractions tiny

By the marching brave recruits..."

(to the air of "C’mon, fellas, uncinch the horses...")

At the Draft Collection and Distribution Point in the regional center, I made a desperate attempt at getting exempted from the army service. During the final medical check, I reported to the oculist that I couldn't see with my left eye any deeper than the second line in his check chart on the wall, although, in fact, I saw three. For that, slightly exaggerated deficiency, I was recognized fit for non-combat service in the construction troops.

After three days of kicking back upon bare-timber decking at other Collection and Distribution Points and equally hard shelves in the railway cars for draftees, in the scant pre-dawn light I stood in the line of draftees on a platform at the Stavropol railway station thoroughly drenched by the last night’s rain in just one shoe. Differently from the Perseus' case, my shoeless foot still had a cotton black sock on.

And what other choice remained there? Early in the morning when they commanded all to leave the car, I searched not only the section I slept in but 2 more under the mad yells of the Sergeant by the exit from the already empty car. My right shoe was nowhere and, while chilly dampness from the puddles in the asphalt around edged in thru the sock fabric, I felt an incipient suspicion gradually building up at the back of my mind that even in absence of direct evidence the disappearance of my footwear item had occurred by dint of the vindictive hand of Valik Nazarenko from the Krolevets city.

Of all the guys in our car section, only he had a thick pack of postcards, and at each stop, he begged the people passing along the platform outside the car to drop a bunch of filled out postcards to a mailbox. Who would deny a young boy being taken away even though not in a prison, yet also in a securely locked railway car?

And after our train left the station, Valik would put on an acute countenance and ask himself his invariable question, "Who else to write to?" And then he answered to himself, "Ah! I know!" and began filling another postcard or two that he goes to serve in the army and has already passed the city of Rostov. In the end, he would read his literary production out loud for all the present in our car section.

All of his writings were alike and concluded by the inevitable, "My best wishes, Valik". On the second day, I suggested him to vary the word order—at least in some postcards, for a change—to make it, "My Valik wishes best". All laughed then, but he laughs best who laughs last and, standing on the platform in a soaked sock, I did not feel like laughing at all. The kickback to my innocent pun left me without a shoe which, most likely, never arrived in the city of Stavropol but stayed way back, mateless, strange and foreign to the rank grass in the embankment wet after the rain in darkness... To a whimsy play on words, the redhead bastard responded by the rude practical joke. However, who's not caught at action is not the joker...

We were told to get into the beds of waiting trucks, that took us thru an unknown, not yet awaken, city and left it by an outgoing highway which also was left for a worn-out asphalt road and, after three more kilometers along an unsubstantial forest edge on the left, there popped up a long white-brick wall by the right roadside, a meter-and-half tall or so.

The trucks drove into the openwork high gate of iron pipes (cross-section 2”) by the whitewashed guardhouse. The glazed red-&-yellow tablet by it outer door announced it was Military-Construction Detail 11, Military Detachment 41769, while the empty road outside the gate went on to the nearby horizon…

We were lead to the bathhouse, before which they asked us whether anyone was going to send his clothes back home. Quire predictably, no one planned anything of the sort, keeping the time

honored tradition, draftees were leaving for the army service in their junk clothes which were eventually dropped on the grass about the bathhouse porch.

Only in the canteen at the Rostov Collection and Distribution Point, I saw a draftee in his suit and necktie. He fell out of the picture by his age too – about ten years older than the surrounding skinhead yobbos, however, he was not twenty-seven yet, otherwise, they wouldn't draft him. And his hair wasn't cut. He ate nothing, just sat without a motion staring in front of himself, or rather looking inward.

> (...because it's only from outside that we all look the same, while inside there is a hell of a lot to consider, the epics unfolding in there are way cooler than the Illyad added by the Odyssey...)

There he sat in a tie loosened on his thick neck, paying no notice to empathetic nor to sarcastic ogles, not knowing what was ahead where they were taking him…

The Military-Construction Detail 11, shortened to VSO-11, had basic minimum engineered for keeping lots of humans in one place.

A close group of five long barracks, paneled from inside with painted plywood sheets and overlaid without with white bricks in shiner position, squatted behind the white brick fence run along the roadside. The barracks were interconnected by the common system of steam-heating pipes running up in the air on tall iron props. For heat insulation, the pipes were wrapped in glass wool, fixed with white glass cloth, and covered with the finishing layer of black roofing felt kept in place by twists of thin baling wire.

Three of the barracks to the right from the gate were lined along the brick wall separating the military territory from the road outside, each of them surrounded by an internal asphalt path. Across the path behind the leftmost barrack, there stood a wider, but also one-story, building comprising the Canteen with its kitchen, and the Club of the detachment.

In the third row, counting from the road, there was the stoker-house, the bathhouse, the shoe-making and sewing shops under one common roof for all.

The drill grounds covered by the layer of rough concrete, started from the gate and stretched on to the Canteen. Opposite the Canteen, across the drill grounds, there stood the last two barracks of the five, parallel to each other and the wall along the outside road. Behind them, next to the far left corner of the drill grounds, there stood a brick toilet, aka *sorteer*, accomplished with 10 holes, aka *ochcos*, in the concrete slab alongside the left wall and the cemented urinal runnel along all of the opposite one.

To the left from the *sorteer*, there stretched a ten-meter tin trough of a washbasin raised by meter-tall rebar props above the ground. The water pipe with a dozen taps ran along over the trough.

Farther on, behind the drill grounds, there stood three tall truck boxes in a raw, each one without the face wall and—to their left—2 rows of sturdy sheds of ware and food storehouses. Behind them, a bit on the outskirts of the detachment's rectangular grounds, stood the squat structure of the pigsty.

Ah, yes! The last but not least – the narrow brick hut of the military store by the gate, opposite the checkpoint guardhouse...

The narrow white wall of bricks stood only along the asphalt road, and the rest of the perimeter was guarded by the fence of barbed wire, so familiar from the early childhood. Behind the truck boxes and the barbed wire fence, a wide field rose hiding in the invisible hollow a deserted sandpit and the village of Tatarka, which was visited by the soldiers of VSO-11 on their AWOL's, aka absences without leave.

As for the road by which we were brought to the detachment, it entered, after another six kilometers, the village of Demino, where the soldiers also went on AWOL's, as well as to the city of Stavropol, sure thing.

But all that I hadn't known yet leaving the bathhouse in the cotton khaki outfit and high *kirza* boots on top of badly wound footcloths – two strips of light coarse calico or flannel fabric (30 cm x 60 cm), which are much more practical than common socks. In summertime, when baring your feet you'll notice the dirty stains left by the dust that sieved in thru the socks' fabric, while the footcloths, however dirty they become themselves, still keep your feet clean. Only they should be wound properly around the feet—tight and smooth, without wrinkles—otherwise, you'd rub your feet to bleeding. And in winter, footcloths without socks feel warmer than footcloths over socks, though both methods do not save toes from getting frozen inside the high boots…

Two soldiers from the previous drafts were poking thru the civilian clothes dropped on the grass in front of the bathhouse, checking whether there were any *citizenka* items suitable for AWOL's...

We were led to the detachment Club fitted out with a stage bare of any curtains, and rows of plywood seats lined across the hall over its tilted floor of not paint-coated timber. Our army service started there by dragging the audience seats out of the Club, washing the wide floorboards, bringing and installing 2-tier iron bunk beds for the Fourth Company personnel to sleep upon, since we, the recruits, were to be kept in their barrack.

With the first non-combat mission accomplished, they collected us by the entrance to the Fourth Company barrack and split into three platoons, each under the command of a separate Sergeant. The Sergeants compiled lists of their commandos, checked them with the general list by the lieutenant and started training the newbies. In all the three platoons were drilled the same commands.

"Platoooon! Fall in!"

"Platoooon! Fall out!"

"Platoooon! Fall in!"

"Platoooon! Fall out!"

"Platoooon! Fall in!"

"Platoooon! Fall out!"

We executed the commands keeping our hunger in check by the wishful thinking because a small group of recruits had been already sent to the Canteen for laying tables with the midday meal. And finally, "Fall in for the meal!"

"Slow.. march!"

In contrast to the Club, where you had to climb three stairs in the porch way to the door, in the Canteen, on entering the door, you went three steps down into the spacious hall filled with two quads of tables split by the central aisle.

On both sides of each table stood a bench of solid painted-brown timber allowing for ten men to sit in a row. The dark gray floor of smoothly polished concrete endowed the hall with a bouncing hum, like in the waiting rooms of passenger stations at their busy hours.

Along the whole left wall, two steps ran beneath the three consecutive windows to the rooms outside the hall. The wide uninterrupted shelf-ledge of white-painted tin stretched under all the three windows. The first (and also the smallest) of the windows was the seat of Bread-Cutter already closed from within with its tin-clad shutter. The next one—wide and having no shutters—presented the view of the kitchen with the steam rising off the wide cylinders of nickel-plated cooking boilers, and a pair of soldier-cooks midst them, in khaki trousers, slippers on bare feet, and tank tops under their half-unbuttoned white jackets in yellowish grease smudges. One of the cooks had a white-cloth beret on his head. The last, also wide and shutterless, window connected to the Dishwashers' room filled with steam and noise of hot water bursting from several taps at once in the long tin trough full of heaps of used enamel cups and bowls, and aluminum spoons.

The far blind wall opposite the entrance, in a pragmatic dark-swamp-slime paint-coat, separated the Canteen from the Club. In the right wall high up above the floor, the row of wooden frames kept the panes of hingeless windows…

The white enamel bowls, arranged in 2 long rows along the table edges, marked the seating places on the benches put close by. 20 aluminum spoons, studded with water drops, were piled in the center of the table for each eater to grab one. Next to the spoons, lay a heavy dipper accompanied by 20 enamel cups spruced up with combat scars from the pell-mell pileups in the Dishwashers' trough. Two and a half, multiply cross-sliced, loaves of "brick"-shaped brown bread on the crumpled aluminum tray provided also exactly 20 chunks...

The cooks began throwing five-liter enameled pots on the ledger-shelf of the dispenser window, issuing shrill indistinct yells. The first meal in the army began.

The borshch was red and scorching hot. It was brought in a pot from the dispenser window and ladled into the bowls with the dipper. Since thru all of the dinner each serviceman was to use just one and the same bowl, the borshch should be eaten to get the second course, or you had to refuse the first course at once and wait until the on-duty soldier brings the following pot with barley porridge, more commonly handled *kirzookha*.

(...take a look at the top in army high boots made of *kirza* [plagiarized English "kersey"], this artificial leather was invented as a war effort during the Russian-Japaneese war and though it did not prevent the defeat of the Russian Empire in that conflict yet for more than a hundred years it faithfully remained in both combatant and non-combatant service.

Now, if you ignore these deviating asides and carefully consider the fine pattern impressed into the surface layer in the top of high boots at the Russian-Soviet-(yes, here again)Russian armies made of the artificial *kirza* leather, you start to understand the accuracy of the unofficial term *kirzookha* traditionally used for the traditional meal of the barley porridge in all of the above-mentioned armies. No wonder, the considered likeness prompted servicemen on the doorsill of their hunger death to cook their boottops as it happened on the small barge that for 49 days became a plaything for storms in the Pacific before it was met by a US aircraft carrier off the coast of California. The Soviet sailors were proposed the political asylum in the United States because the Cold War proclaimed by the British hereditary political star Churchill in the Fulton piece of his orations raged globally at that time.

However, Sergeant Ziganshin recollected the beauty of both sunsets and dawns in his native Tatarstan steppe and refused. The rest three sailors followed the suit (being not Tatars though) and later all of them were awarded one of the higher orders in the Soviet Union after a proper check if they didn't become CIA agents while being fed up back to normal in the cornucopious State of California [only by mid-90's Askhat Ziganshin managed to rehabilitate from his addiction caused by the never-subsiding making him drunk at undercover interrogation sessions disguised as ceremonial parties].

All that happened in 1960 and gave birth to a popular folk-rock song running something like this:

Beware the boogie man!

Ziganshin's on the loot!

The night before

He chomped his buddy’s boot!

Which is the oddest point in this whole story because at that period the USSR hadn't got any VIA yet...)

The porridge was liquid too and as hot as the borshch. Compote poured into the cups from well-dented aluminum kettles, was not so hot, yet also liquid. The stunning din of bustle in a railway station served the background to munching and slurping. At times (not every day though) the peaceful symphony of animated feeding got pierced thru by loud curses and dings of a cup hurled bouncing and spilling along the central aisle. Nothing to get jumpy about, the soldier noticed that his cup was leaking and expressed his indignation with that fact because in the since-long-established prison tradition using of impaired utensils was the prerogative as well as the mark of a *petukh*, aka faggot among inmates.

On finishing the meal, the tools of personal saturation had to be taken to the Dishwashers' window and put in the appropriate piles or stacks on the shelf-ledge. As those accumulate, Dishwashers themselves would topple the heaps into the corresponding sections of the trough under the streams of steaming water from the taps.

Now we could leave the Canteen and return to the "training" barrack so as not to miss the next command to fall in…

The subsequent army experience proved that borshch was never to happen for breakfast or supper, those started immediately with *kirzookha*, and in the morning next to the bread on the tables they put a tray with 20 cubes (1" x 1" x 0.5") of yellow butter brought from the Bread-Cutter's window, which you spread on the bread with the handle of aluminum spoon picked up from the pile. If the butter was brought in one piece it was portioned by the most authoritative serviceman of those present at the table, with his spoon handle.

The piece of butter could also be reduced by a passer-by serviceman who started his army service a year and a half earlier, and now approached your table to reward himself for his combat merits. The lump sugar, brought for tea, would also do for one or another honored veteran…

On the whole, the ration was unpretentious, yet enough for to survive. In autumn it became even simpler – cabbage and water for the first course, cabbage and no water for the second, water and no cabbage for the third.

On a seldom lucky day, you could detect a sliver of lard a-floating in your portion of the *kirzookha* porridge (the detachment had its pigsty, after all) but nothing beyond the lard.

And on the Soviet holidays, they would even add white buns for the morning tea…

At first, I couldn't eat soldiers' food. Not that I was over-squeamish, but simply because no matter how hard I tried I still couldn't manage to stuff that ration into myself. It stubbornly stuck in the throat.

At one of the meals, a soldier from the previous draft, seeing my diligent agony, laughed and explained, "No fear! You'll get used and start to *havvat* anything." He was right. The matter was that in the construction battalion they did not eat, but "havvat".

"The company went to *havvat* – catch on!"

"And what *havvage* is it today?"

As soon as I stopped eating and started *havvating*, everything fell into place. At times, I even *havvatted* an additional portion.

But that came later because if a soldier in his first half-year in the service (handled in that period "young", or "salaga", or "salabon") dared approach the dispenser window with the bowl in hands, the cook, most likely, would feel lazy to splash into it a scoop of *havvage* and simply shriek instead, "Fuck you, *salabon*!" Not because of being a genetic misanthropist, but just aping the attitude he had suffered from when being a "young" himself. However, he also might not start shrieking – you come across exceptions anywhere.

> (...in his 2 years in the army service, a Soviet soldier ascended the hierarchical ladder of servicemanship.
>
> In the first six months, he was a *salaga*, aka *young*, aka *salabon*.
>
> For the next six months—after the following draft had brought in a new wave of youngs—he became a *dipper*.
>
> 1 year of service and 2 younger drafts behind made him a *pheasant*.
>
> For the concluding six months, with no old-timers above him, he was a *grandpa*.
>
> And, at last, Minister of Defense of the USSR has signed the order on demobilization of the servicemen drafted 2 years ago, which act turns a *grandpa* into a *dembel* to be dismissed on the arrival of the new draftees.
>
> The hierarchy terminology is not overly hieroglyphic.
>
> *Young* meant the youngest in the service.
>
> *Dippers* were entrusted with dealing the *havvage* out – for the *youngs* too early, for the senior servicemen below their status.
>
> *Pheasants* took in the width of their cotton pants to have them tight like sausage skin and began to stagger kinda bunch of dandies.
>
> *Grandpa* was antipodal to *young*, and *dembel* presented a nice abbreviation for "demobilization".
>
> To go thru that ladder you had to live 2 years... At the age of 18 or 20 such quantity of time seems an eternity.
>
> Besides, the quality of time in the army is unpredictable, some days fly by hardly having been started, while others – vice versa, you feel that no less than a week had

passed already but—no!—it's still today. In the army, the amount of time of the latter sort prevails over that of the one mentioned first.

The most miserable lot was that of *dembels* who had pulled, and pushed, and dragged the un-embraceable lump of 2 years to the finish.

For them each hour became an eternity filled with soul trepidation, anxiety beyond any good riddance, disbelief that that was possible at all.

Soldiers from the lower rungs of the ladder tried to spur time employing for the purpose card calendars where all the 12 months of the year were printed on one side, while the card reverse called to keep money in the saving banks or fly by the Aeroflot airplanes.

They ruthlessly pricked each day lived thru with a needle, one by one. The card calendars lost their glossy appeal, but when raised against the sky, they showed quads of pin-thick holes – 1 for a month lived thru.

Such calendar-pricking calls for a disciplined unswerving mind and remarkable willpower. Not by a single *pheasant* have ever I happened to see such a calendar. Eternity humbles and crushes any high-and-mighty pride...)

The first day in the service ended about midnight – we were trained to fit into 45 seconds when going to sleep or getting up after it. In the time specified, you had to remove all your outfit, carefully stack the items on a stool in the central aisle lit by the long daylight lamps under the ceiling, and dive into your bunk in the *koobrik*, and cover yourself with a sheet and blanket.

Koobrik was four two-tier bunk beds set in two rows closely, side by side, separated from the neighboring *koobriks* by narrow passages where you collided with those who slept in the next *koobrik's* beds. The collisions were just inevitable because the width of the inter-*koobrik* passage was dictated by the 40-centimeter-wide cabinet-box crammed in between the bunk beds and bounding the passage with 8 newbies who rush to their bunks. Oops!. Ouch!.

Under the top of the 70-centimeter-tall cabinet-box, there was a drawer. The door below the drawer provided access to the inside shelves. Those 2 shelves and the drawer were allotted to 8 people whose bunk beds towered above the half-meter-wide 4-meter-long passage. If any of the beds in the passage was occupied by a *grandpa*, then all of the cabinet-box, the drawer as well as both shelves under it, was his sovereign stowage whose indivisible immunity was not a matter for the feeblest discussion. In case it was a *pheasant* but not a *grandpa*, he could farm out the lower shelf, still, not every *pheasant* would.

Construction battalion trained you to live lightly and not burden yourself with things you could do without. As for your safety razor, it could find a place on the shelf of the buddies from your draft who happened to have neither oldies nor birds in the passage of their *koobrik*...

Raising questions before commanding officers had undesirable backwash on the state of health. The "pheasant-grandpa" system was the pledge of military discipline in the army, and an officer

with disregard to it was sawing off the bough he sat upon. Therefore, in case of being addressed with some complaint, he complained about you to the "grandpas". In the evening, the officer would go home after his day at the service, and at night the "grandpas" were damaging your state of health.

Yet, all that was to be discovered later, and now the Sergeants were walking along the central aisle of the training barrack, looking for a footcloth wound not accurately enough around its boot top, or a belt dropped in a hurry over the stool in a careless manner, or the absence of any part of outfit – the son of a bitch had dived under the blanket half-dressed!.

Finding where to find fault, they commanded a general "get up!" and the training began anew. No chance that we had started doing the job any better, most likely, the Sergeants themselves wanted to sleep. After another "lights-out!" they did not command "get up!" and the long fluorescent tubes in the ceiling over the central aisle were switched off, except for the one over the cabinet-box at the entrance to the barrack. Its remote light was not a hindrance, you could close your eyes and...

"Get up!!"

What? What for?! O, shit, it's morning! And where's the night?

> (...I have told already that time in the army is a dirty bitch, ain't I?.)

~ ~ ~

A couple of "get up!" were conducted without much of nit-picking though, just to remind you're in the army now, bastards. Which leniency was caused by the breakfast ahead, and if we were late for it, the cook-*grandpa* would hail the Sergeants with his "*J'ai presque dû attendre*" from the dispenser window.

> (...the kings of France had a special courtier whose job was to clap his pole against the floor and thus bring attention to the monarch's entry to this or that hall in one or another of the royal palaces. The clap was coupled with the strident yell, "His Majesty the King!"
>
> So, one day at the Louvre, Louis of Certain Number, approaching the door to the general hall, noticed that the announcer was not in place. Maybe, dropped around a corner to correct a certain kind of mess in his outfit...
>
> Yet, at the very last moment, directly from nowhere, the courtier with the pole ducked in the doorway and—as required by the statute—boomed his bang into the floor, "His Majesty the King!"
>
> In fact, the King hadn't even had to march on the spot, and passing by the servant, without much fuss, he reproached him in a royally dignified way:

"*J'ai presque dû attendre*."

When translated from French, it means "I almost had to wait"...)

But the *grandpa* in the window would translate it another way:

"You, fucker! Got too fucking cocky, eh? They threw that Sergeant stripe-snot across your shoulder-strap and you lost your scent? I fucking fuck your fucking rank and you too! You once again be late and I'll have you dispensing the fucking pots. You fucking cock!"

And the Sergeant would have nothing to parry such a translation with, because if though not a "cock", yet for the current period, he still was just a *pheasant*.

(...What on earth could any king have to do with our construction battalion? The most intimate connection. The commonly used, albeit unofficial, denomination of the Soviet Army military construction battalions—aka conbats—was "the royal troops".

Got that under your belt? On we go.

The outfit of the military conbat soldier, aka conbatist, consisted of a khaki piss-cutter with a small red-cherry star screwed in its bow with the still smaller yellow sickle-and-hammer inside. The star was a very important detail called to make easy seeing the front from the rear in that headgear.

On the strength of its shape, the piss-cutter was of no use for protecting the soldier's ears. When caught in the strong wind or rain, you could turn off the cap's flaps and pull it on your skull, yet the trick bestowed on the serviceman the looks of a mugger in a "condom"-hat.

Under certain circumstances, the conbatist could even put his piss-cutter crosswise, that is, with the star transferred into position above one or another of his ears. The cap applied in that manner was supposed to present a motif "a-la Tricorn of Bonaparte", however, on the whole, that looked like a dull moron with the star on the side of his fucking gibbosity.

Alternately, the head of the conbat soldier might be covered with a forage cap, but, according to the Statute of Inner Service, the forage cap should co-occur with the jacket and trousers over the blunt-nosed high shoes of black leather. Such a set was briefly referred to as "parade-crap" (ceremonial uniform) with black shoulder-straps on the shoulders of the jacket. (...black is always in vogue…)

The black insignia fields up the lapels of the ceremonial outfit were decorated with miniature emblems of military construction troops, made of a light yellow alloy. The same emblem was repeated in a larger size on the forearm part of the jacket's left sleeve, but already without any metal impurities.



The Brief Heraldic Explication of the Conbat Emblem

“Battalion Commander pours forth Thunder-and-Lightning;

Ensign trots like a squirrel in the Wheel;

I dropped the Anchor and don't care a fuck,

They won't urge me onward

Not even with the fucking Bulldozer.”

* * *

Between the parade-crap jacket lapels peeped a khaki shirt and a necktie of a darker hue of khaki with the elastic string—like that in underpants—hidden under the collar and secretly holding the tie in place.

But let's turn back to the casual (everyday) uniform the upper part of which (the cap) has already been exposed, in general.

The innermost layer of those sheathing a conbatist were underpants and a tank-shirt (in winter long-sleeve undershirt and long johns).

These next to the skin items at the following (moving outward) lever had a composite cover of the khaki cotton jacket without any shoulder-straps (in case you got promoted to any rank distinguished by a number of yellow stripes across the shoulder-strap, then you were in charge of procuring the needed insignia).

Five round buttons of light green plastic had no holes but a single protruding eyelet in the underbelly so as to save their entire globoid faces for the embellishing bass-relief of pentacle star that contained sickle and hammer (crisscross) in its center, all of which served to fasten the jacket's front vertically. The skirts of the jacket reached the middle of the thighs and its sides had straight pockets—just below the waist—covered with flaps wide enough to prevent ground getting inside when the conbatist dug holes. The buttons in the wide sleeve cuffs were of the same green plastic, and of the same design, but thrice smaller in size.

Under the left breast in the jacket, there was the inner sack-like pocket of khakied burlap.

Besides the jacket, the second level layer in casual uniform included trousers—some proud manifestation of the ideals of pragmatism—two cotton pipes of legs, narrowing downwards, overlaid with large patches on knees for hardening and prolonging the service life of the whole item, two upright pockets on the hips had no flaps and the small smooth buttons of emblematic decorations to operate the fly. (Just for the record, at each of the leg down apertures there also was an inch-wide strip sewn across the openings but the fanciful additions got cut off at once so that they wouldn't fuck your brains nor rub your soles.)

In winter the cap was replaced by a hat with ear-flaps made of artificial gray fur. The fastening strings at the flap tips allowed for wearing such a hat in four distinct manners:

1. "ears up"-type, aka King Solomon Crown;

2. "ears pressed under the back of the head"-type, aka Cautious Rabbit;

3. "ears loosened"-type, aka Hawk Coasting Proudly;

4. "ears tied under the chin"-type, aka Sparring Partner.

A padded jacket constituted the outmost layer worn in winter. Upright stitches, keeping the wool lining in place, gave the padded jacket a hybrid-like looks of epic heroes combat outfit and concentration camp uniform, only in an unvarying khaki color.

Instead of a padded jacket, a soldier could wear a pea-jacket with the smooth outside surface. The latter surpassed the padded jacket in many ways. Firstly, there was twice as much wool in its lining and hence it was warmer. Secondly, it reached the middle of the thighs, covering the groin and buttocks from the nasty extremes of winter weather.

And one final glimpse of the parade-crap, not to omit the double-breasted greatcoat of cloth-felt completing the ceremonial ensemble in winter.

The greatcoat ended a bit below the knees and had 2 vertical rows of yellow metallic buttons (same bass-relief of the loaded star etc.) on the breast (one of the rows decorative). Behind—across the sacrum—the short strip of same-fabric, half-belt, with a buttons at each end (both decorative), under which, just next to the rectum, started the vertical gash splitting the skirts – in case of the need to quicken the pace or for any other needs.

And last but not least, the wide belt of sturdy tarpaulin with the weighty metal plate-buckle which could be used for a host of purposes, starting from digging a hole up to becoming a lethal weapon in a fight, when used as a mace on a string, sort of. It was not used to keep a soldiers pants though but to have him girded over any jacket or greatcoat he had on, and only in the parade-crap the belt was not observed, yet mostly present under the jacket, just in case.

Here, in short, how the construction battalion soldier, aka conbatist, was dressed. Though we, the spring draft of 1973, at first were honored and trusted to finish off the Russian and Red Armies' tunics with the stand-up collar, aka choker, which had been inherited and kicking back around in the warehouses of the Soviet Army. Later on, when we had worn them off to tatters and they became a real rarity, the "pheasants" were steaming with the itch to get such a one, unlike anybody else's.

The comparative analysis of the component items in the outfit of the conbatist serviceman shows that the most idiotic piece in it was the forage cap, being uncomfortable to put under your head when sleeping, because of its hard visor, and mulishly resistant to attempts at pulling it over your ears in the rain...)

Each of the barracks was entered thru the outside cell in the middle of its long side. The narrow vestibule (3m x 3m) had the floor of wide ash-colored tiles underneath the low ceiling of painted plywood resting on wide lattice windows in its walls.

Outside the front door, a rectangular grating of parallel rebar-rods bridged a shallow cemented pit for the dirt falling off the high boots when scraped against the grating.

Close to the vestibule there stood an equally sized openwork gazebo with a bench of three beams running along the three plank sides. Its four-sided roof was propped by the posts in the gazebo corners. In the center of the cemented floor there was another pit, this one of rounded walls and without any lid or grating – for the servicemen to throw their cigarette stubs in, which eventually would be cleaned up by the on-duty soldier.

Next to the gazebo, there stretched a three-meter-long footrest allowing several men to simultaneously put one or the other of their feet upon it when polishing their high boots.

Anything omitted? Oh, yes! And the grass on both sides of the asphalt path around the barrack. When the Sergeants got over hot with drilling us in the sun-swept drill grounds, bounded by the gate, the Canteen, and the *sorteer*, or fed up with driving it home to us the meaning of lines in the booklet of the Statute of Internal Military Service, they cut us loose with the order to eradicate ragweed, aka ambrosia.

Previously, I knew for sure that ambrosia was a cheerful drink at the feasts of the eternally young and immortal gods of Olympus, and never suspected it had a nickname – the terribly vicious grass. We were shown sheets with a black-and-white picture of the wanted culprit coupled with short lines calling to find and liquidated the offender spreading dangerous hay fever.

That was the one and only unreservedly welcome command because the Sergeants disappeared for an hour or so, and, lying in the grass, we could talk and get acquainted in no hurry... From Konotop there was no one but me and others were from different cities – Buryn, Krolevets, Shostka, in the same Sumy region.

In general, the entire spring draft to VSO-11 was from Ukraine with the Dnepropetrovsk fellas brought before us. They had already undergone the training and got distributed to the companies of the battalion. Taking advantage of the Sergeants' absence, a couple of them sneaked into the gazebo to collect the cigarette stubs from the rounded hole, dropped there by us at the command to fall in.

Nobody really knew why the poor Ambrosia was hunted down so severely, and nothing in the grass around resembled it even remotely, but the idle talks helped to at least shortly forget about the gruesome eternity piled on us for the following two years…

~ ~ ~

The newly acquired outfit harbored certain predicament at training the commands of "get up!" and "light out!", the buttons could hardly be squeezed in and out of the tight buttonholes. On the advice of a wise newbie Vitya Strelyany, I widened them with an aluminum spoon handle in the Canteen, and they began to fly in and out nice and swiftly...

The immediate goal of the drill training was to sell ourselves on the Oath Day. All in all, there were three platoons in the "training" barrack with one and the same song for them all, which was often aired by the All-Union "Mayak" Radio Station.

"In two winters,

Merely in two winters,

In two summers,

Merely in two summers

I'll do my honest service in the army

And come back to you..."

After the first platoon finished their ceremonial-step circling round and round the drill grounds and singing the song in a false course chorus concluded by the finalizing, "Stop! One-two!" the second platoon marched into the same ground singing the same song, which turned unbearably long. And when at last they also stopped, we, the third platoon, stomped in, blaring about the third pair of winters and summers, which was a crying redundancy.

The recruits snickered, the Sergeants of the first and second platoons laughed outright, and our Sergeant got icky nervous... When I told him I could prepare another song for us to sing, if only I had a pen and paper, he did not immediately get it what I was talking about, but then I was set free from the drill grounds to do creative work for the benefit of the platoon.

The Sergeant instructed me to get the needed stationery from the on-duty soldier guarding the cabinet-box… The first thing you saw on entering any barrack was a soldier standing next to the cabinet-box. The soldier was an on-duty serviceman, and the cabinet-box was his sentry post. Standing there, he had to issue the command "Company! At attention!" when the barrack was entered by an officer.

There were 2 on-duty privates daily who replaced each other by the cabinet-box every four hours, and at the mealtime, the one free from the watch went to the Canteen under command of the on-duty Sergeant to lay the tables with the *havvage* for the company servicemen to have it.

Those 3 (the on-duty Sergeant and the pair of private men) were called "on-duty detail" and stayed it for 24 hours. The current on-duty Sergeant was surprised by my request, yet he gave me a pen and a sheet of paper.

Passing to the end of the barrack, I entered the room which the company political commander, aka zampolit, called "Leninist Room" because its walls were paneled by yellow chipboard and next to the mirror there hung the brown-yellow icon of Leader's profile in a piece of Beaverboard, but in the soldiers' lingo it was "live-mains room" because of the wall sockets for an iron or electric razors and the mirror wide enough to be used by 2 or 3 of shaving men at once...

The song air was no problem – everyone knew the perennial hit:

"Maroosya, a black-haired girl,

Picked berries

Of gelder rose...."

But not everyone knew that originally the song was sung as "C'mon, fellas, uncinch the horses..." which meant that it got used to transformations of its lyrics:

"Our parade march is the best,

And our song's the loudest,

That's the tune

Of our platoon!.."

Sitting over a sheet of paper I twirled the pen in my fingers picking up words in my mind, fitting them this or that way. And gradually the Leninist live-mains around me, and the acrid smell of fresh cotton from my uniform, and the smarting itch in my right foot rubbed to bleeding, all that faded into the woodwork. I was in AWOL from the army...

Yes, we did learn and sing it quite bravely…

~ ~ ~

At the end of the day, the rookies stood at ease about the entrance to the "training" barrack when the Master Sergeant of Fourth Company, a man of about 40 with a round good-natured face and a paunch of the potbelly, was passing by.

He stopped to ask where we were drafted from. Probably, he just wanted to while away the half-hour before the Ensigns and officers, as well as a couple or two of women from the accountancy by the Detachment Staff were to be taken to the Stavropol-City. For the overnight staying in the battalion, there remained only the on-duty officer.

One of us, Vanya by his name, seeing the human disposition of the senior in rank, asked with a sucking-up smile, "Comrade Master Sergeant, could they exempt me because of this?"

Lowering his head, he rested his index finger in a wide scar on his pate, that peeped thru the bristles of the close-cut.

"Fucking smartie, fixin' to fuck the army?" said the Master Sergeant. "No fucking way!" And he slapped Vanya's shoulder blades with his broad fatty hand.

From the sonorous spank, Vanya bent in the opposite direction and pouted to show that it hurt, "Ouch!"

The soldiers readily laughed at the witty remark of the Master Sergeant…

As for the tactical drills, I even liked them. All the three platoons of rookies were formed into one column and marched out of the battalion grounds to the field by the pigsty. The Sergeants explained that "flash" meant a nuclear bomb explosion, and it was necessary to drop flat on the ground with your head in the flash direction.

Then the command "run march!" followed, and when the whole column moved in a disorderly trot, one of the Sergeants yelled, "Flash on right!" With animated yells and screams, we clumsily fell in the grass. The drill was repeated several times.

> (...an eternity later, when we also became "grandpas" and the buddies from my draft recollected those "flash on left!" and "flash on right!" as one of the inhuman trials for the startup *youngs*, I could not understand them.
>
> I still do not understand. Running in the summer field, tumbling in the green grass when you have the strength and wish – it's just fun!
>
> ***"How young we were at that time!***
>
> ***How young we were at that time!."...)***

After the concentrated, hard, fatigue-denying, training in the course of the unforgettable four days, we took the Military Oath and became servicemen at the Armed Forces of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. No, we were not holding any automatic or another kind of weapons which customarily adorned that ceremonial ritual in the Soviet Army. We just took turns stepping out of the ranks to approach the desk in the asphalt path, pick up the sheet with the text of the Military Oath, read it, put it back onto the desk, sign another sheet (the lieutenant indicated the place for the signature), step back to the ranks, turn about and face the barrack wall made of white silicate brick laid in shiner position.

Behind the desk, facing our ranks, there stood two officers. If somebody, while taking the Military Oath, was not quite dexterous about the reading of the printed text, they did not really pick on him – just finish it off quick and scribble your scratch on the sheet.

In the end, the lieutenant asked if anyone had a medical education. After a moment of refrained confusion in the ranks, a young soldier stepped out and reported his having been a help for the paramedic at the first-aid post in his village. He was singled out to continue his service at Fourth Company, as well as four professional drivers from our draft.

> (...how many times in the 2 years that followed, I cursed myself with every taboo word under the sun for missing to step forward and report my 3 years of reading up for admittance exams at the neurosurgery department of a medical institute!.)

Then they announced where each of us belonged. I got to First Company, that of masons. Plasterers served at Second and Third Companies. Fourth Company was for drivers and everything else.

We were taken to the respective barracks and presented to the commanders of our squads who indicated free bunk beds in the *koobrik*s of the silent empty barrack because at that time of day the company personnel was working at construction sites in the city…

In all the living nature there hardly could be found more disgusting sounds than the thrice-cursed command "Company! Get up!"

> (...anticipatorily, I should confess that when being an on-duty private and having waited for the hands in the large square clock above the sentinel cabinet-box to fall exactly to six o'clock in the morning, I also took a deep breath and yelled in the meanest voice I was capable of:
>
> "Companyeeeeeeee! Get uuuuuup!"
>
> An eye for an eye. And an ear for the tormented ear...)

After the first night in the barracks of First Company, of all my personal belongings in the cabinet-box of the *koobrik* I slept in, there remained only a half-pack of razors "Neva" priced 25 kopecks when full. The loss of the toothbrush and paste-tube together with the safety razor was not so depressing as the disappearance of 30 kopecks from the pocket in my cotton pants. That would buy me two packs of cigarettes "Prima". I recollected the fellas from Dnepropetrovsk picking up cigarette stubs from the trash pit in the "training" barrack's gazebo.

Having meticulously covered my bed with the blanket (otherwise, the on-duty serviceman would rip it off and demand to do it better), I collared my neck with the army waffle towel, as everyone else around, and went to the *sorteer* in the general flow of khaki color.

Over each of the ten hole-*ochcos*, someone was squatting attended by a waiting line of 2 or 3, and even the wall-width-long urinal runnel was not accessible at once. The place was filled with a babel of tinkling, farting and exchanging news of the past day.

"He was rat-arsed then?"

"You knows yoursel."

"Got caught?"

"I am fucked if I know. They were looking for him."

"They'll get him."

"You knows yoursel."

At the washstand trough, they milled the same piece of news only in more detail.

By eight o'clock the on-duty Sergeants had driven the *youngs* and *dippers* of their respective companies to the drill grounds and carried out the complex of exercises. Then the companies had their breakfast and got loosely lined, 4 rows deep, on the drill grounds except for those *grandpas* who fucking fucked all those fall-ins already.

At a little to eight, the "goat"-Willys of Battalion Commander and a small bus with the officers and accountancy ladies pulled up at the gate.

Battalion Commander, Political Second-in-Command, aka Zampolit, and Chief of Staff went to the middle of the drill grounds, the officers joined the ranks of their respective companies, the accountants bypassed the barrack of Third Company heading to the barrack of Fourth Company – half of that building accommodated the Staff of VSO-11.

The Morning Dispensing started with the report of the on-duty officer to the trinity of Commanders that during the last day there were neither incidents nor violations in the Construction Detail 11. Then Chief of Staff ordered two soldiers from Third Company to step out and face the ranks. The day before they violated military discipline at the construction sites in the city. He announced the penalty – 10 days of arrest.

The gray-haired Battalion Commander, turning from side to side his horn-rimmed glasses, commenced the prosecution harangue. Those oratories of his were outright beyond comprehension because his chronic brain leakage allowed him to reach no further than the middle of a current sentence, and then he leaped to another one of which though no more than a half saw its completion and left you puzzled whether that was the starting or concluding part in it.

Behind the Battalion Commander's back, Separate Company was approaching along the asphalt path on their way to the Canteen for their breakfast *havvage*. They fucking fucked all that Dispensing, they were Separate Company not belonging to VSO-11.

Finally, Zampolit told Battalion Commander that was enough for the rhetoric. Battalion Commander fired off a pair of concluding "fucks" and shut up.

The on-duty officer passed his responsibilities to another officer whose turn it was to stand on duty for the following twenty-four hours.

The discipline violators surrendered their belts to the new on-duty Sergeant and plodded to the checkpoint guardhouse to get locked up in the clink there, the darkroom with the tin-veneered door and no windows at all, yet provided with the decking of planks to lie upon.

Chief of Staff ordered the rest of the servicemen to turn right and march to our workplaces. We walked to the gate with the trucks already waiting for us outside. Battalion Commander started up – a shred of a sentence that had slipped off when he was at it, landed back into the Colonel Lieutenant's brain.

Fuck yourself, fucker! The Dispensing's over! We're already boarding the trucks – a foot on the tire-tred, hands grabbed atop the plank-side, swing over it and rush further so as the following buddy wouldn't land on your back. Off we go!

The gate stayed behind; the wall of white brick panels between the white brick pillars ran by on the left. We're going to the city!.

On arrival, it turned out just outskirts with a construction site in the remnants of a windbreak belt, the project of a nine-story residential building of two sections whose walls of white silicate brick reached already about half of their height.

The commander of our team-squad brought us to a tall hillock of bricks piled up by the dump trucks and ordered to stack bricks on pallets. Each pallet was just four thick planks, one-meter-and-twenty in length, nailed to a pair of crosswise beams, 90 cm x 6 cm x 6cm, which became the pallet's footing so that the steel cable slings of the tower crane would easily pass beneath the pallet's underbelly. Twelve courses of bricks upon the pallet (some 300 bricks, all in all) made for about one cubic meter of masonry, but the bricks had to be stacked into courses retaining the bond pattern, so that the pallet load wouldn't pour down when hoisted by the crane to transport bricks to the bricklayers up the walls.

In fact, the job was not overly exhaustive, but doing it, we learned that silicate dust gnaws into your palm skin and it smarts, but they gave us no protective mitts... Grisha Dorfman examines plaintively looked his bare hands...

Besides, the white silicate dust clings fast to your outfit and is really hard to shake off, but they never bothered to give us any overalls...

The same truck took us back to the detachment for the midday meal. The passers-by on the sidewalks did not care to watch a squad of conbatists in the bed of a vehicle rolling by.

After the fork off the highway outside the city, the truck bypassed a clump of industrial buildings on the right roadside at which sight the buddies from our team-squad kicked up crazy yell-and-whistle waving in that direction, like a pack of football fans whizzed in the truck-bed past their team entering the field.

Vitya Strelyany reluctantly explained that was a Zona there, which made it crystal-clear—the ex-cons' solidarity...

> (...30 percent of the servicemen in the construction battalions comprised citizens who had served their time in prison for not excessively grave crimes.
>
> The majority of the remaining 70 percent were considered fit for non-combatant military service because of their lousy education level, poor health conditions or, as in my case, for left-handed tricks to dodge out of the army service.

> At occasional bubbles of clarity midst his chronic brain-leakage, our Battalion Commander happened to give forth pieces of indisputable truth, "You're the fucking rabble of cripples and jail-birds, fuck the whore of your mother!"...)

From work, we were brought at dusk already. The evening roll-call following the supper was run by First Company Commander, Captain Pissak.

The servicemen fell into two ranks with the *youngs* (so was the law) in the front one. Facing the company personnel, Captain Pissak called the roll never looking up from the list, he just listened to the calls in answer:

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

He needed no visual clues and was able to determine the current state of a serviceman merely by the timbre of the voice yelling his "Here!" in response.

When the roll-call list reached the *youngs*, Pissak was approaching and standing still against each of the new "Here!" to shortly and silently examine your face with the unblinking gaze from under the black visor in his forage cap. Then he called out the next one.

That was enough – you got fixed in his photographic memory for two years ahead and one month later, instead of, "What's your name, private?" he would say, "Private Ogoltsoff!"

"Yes, Comrade Captain!"

"Are you thief-swaggering?"

"No, Comrade Captain!"

"Then why is your belt-buckle dangling by your balls? Sergeant Batochkin!"

"Yes, Comrade Captain!"

"Five fatigues to private Ogoltsoff."

"Yes, Comrade Captain!"

Well, yes, when we were approaching the nine-story building site, I loosened the belt over my tunic a bit, how could I know he would pop up from behind the trees in the windbreak?.

That day I tried my best to curry favor with the Sergeant who sent me to plane the ground with a spade for the subsequent installing of the curbstones. I did some fucking great job! Two hundred meters if not more, in the hope that the Sergeant, seeing my zeal, would blink at the fatigues.

"Two conbatists full of vigor

substitute a backhoe digger..."

2 passers-by on the nearby sidewalk were so impressed with my working style, that approached me with an invitation to partake in wine from the bottle they carried.

"No. Thank you! I cannot."

At the evening roll-call, the Sergeant beckoned me with his finger – "on the floors!"

"On the floors" meant – when all would get in their bunk beds, you sweep the aisle as well as the passages in the *koobrik*s, bring water from the washstand trough by the *sorteer* and perform wet cleaning of the entire sixty-seven-meter-long barrack with its *koobrik*s and the vestibule.

Do it in two steps. Step One: with a thoroughly drenched rag, rub each fucking inch in the linoleum flooring. Step Two: wash the rag, squeeze dry and repeat Step One. And the oftener you change the water for drenching, the better so that there remained no bleary spots in the linoleum and you won't be commanded to do the whole toil anew.

Then go and report to the on-duty Sergeant the job waits for checking. And if he accepted it at once, you could go to bed and be happy about not being sent that evening "on the floors" to the Canteen. Now you might flake out on your bunk bed and the moment your head touched the pillow you'd hear, "Companyeeeeee! Get uuuup!"

~ ~ ~

"They took Vanya to the nuthouse."

"What Vanya?"

"Come on, you knows yoursel. The scar in his pate."

"What for?"

"Did not get up in the morning. Says mice crept into his high boot."

"Dodging, or gone fucking nuts?"

"Who fucking knows? They'll check there."

The first day-off we had in August. Till then from half-past eight till dark they kept us slavering on construction sites.

And—all of a sudden—a whole Sunday in the detachment grounds. The *youngs* washed their dusted smelly uniforms. They placed the washing on the brick wall along the trafficless road and roamed outside the barracks in black underpants, white tank-tops, and *kirza* high boots, like those sporty Fritzes with Schmeisser guns in the movie "One Chance In a Thousand".

During the period till the first day-off, our team-squad dropped the habit of saluting the roadside Zona by scream-and-shout. And going to the *sorteer* in the mornings of clear weather, we didn't stop in our tracks anymore to stare at the faraway wonder – the snow-clad top of the Elbrus Mountain hovering in the sky over the pigsty. Private Alimonov, aka Alimosha, taught me to smoke a stub of cigarette "Prima", chiseled from buddies, until there remained three millimeters of the tobacco-wrapping paper tube…

And one time we even got the payment. The Master Sergeant of First Company, a gray-haired man under 50, well imbibed, called us, one by one, to his ware-room and meted out one-ruble-plus to each, adding a piece of white cloth for under-collars, a pair of shoe polish cans, and a spool of threads for sewing up the under-collars after washing them. But in the pay-roll, we signed for 3 rubles and 80 kopecks each because everyone knew, whoever you'd ask, that the monthly payment of a private in the Soviet Army was 3 rub. 80 kop., that was as indisputable an axiom as that about the Volga River and the Caspian Sea...

Midsummer, at one of the evening roll-calls, the company zampolit announced sending to my wife, at her request, the reference certifying I was in the army.

"You did not say you were married, Goly!"

"You didn't ask."

> (...they had no time for marriage doing their stretch in the penitentiary colonies for juvenile offenders...)

Olga, Konotop, the Plant, the dances seemed something unreal, like dreams seen in another, far away, life. I was receiving letters from her, "...and in the evenings when I see how girls are walking with their guys and I am all alone and by myself it hurts so that I am crying..."

There were also letters by Mother, both brother and sister wrote a couple of times.

I did not know what to write in response. "Hello, I've received your letter, many thanks for it.."

And then? What else to write? "...in two winters, in two summers..."?

Nothing entered my head. And I already couldn't think a single simple thought without "fuck" and "fucking" within it. Such a fucking dickhead!

Just think of it, even to my closest kin people there remained nothing but the feeling of detachedness in me. Detachedness?

Well, something like what I felt when in the thickening twilight we were sitting already in the bed of a truck beneath the white wall in the unfinished nine-story building and waited for a *grandpa*-bricklayer changing into his uniform.

Another *grandpa*, in the truck bed already, started heckling Misha Khmelnytsky—just so, to idle the time—for his being a Ukrainian, aka Khokhol.

Misha, averting his eyes, muttered that, no, he was not a Ukrainian and it's only that kind of the last name. The rest of the *youngs* sat in silence. The *grandpa* started to scoff – what a lousy draft they brought from Ukraine with not a single Khokhol!

"Okay, I'm a Khokhol, so what of that?"

Only when those words somehow echoed back from the brick wall looming whitish thru the dark, I realized that it was me who said it. It's strange to hear yourself from outside so unexpectedly. Some weird self-detachedness. The *grandpa* shut up. And really – what of that? Or of anything else?.

Later, Misha Khmelnytsky revealed to me that he also was married, adding intimate details of how he always had the itch to take a leak into his wife's cunt after he cum, just for fun, but it never came out.

Making no comments, I rejoiced in my mind that the evolution process of the homo sapiens species anticipated an anatomical mechanism to prevent fucking jokes of such fucked in the head funny fuckers...

Of course, my comrades-in-arms did not use the terms like "evolution" or "sapiens" in everyday communication, however, it cost them no noticeable effort to recite by heart the unrhymed lines of one or another article from the Penal Code of the USSR.

"What was you locked up for?"

"Article six hundred seventeen, part two 'by aggravating circumstances'."

"Brain-fucker, you! There's no such article!."

"Introduced recently, for chronic cannibalism."

It turned out that tattoo was not just an ornamental decoration but an esoteric message for the initiated, it reported of what exactly crime convicted, how high arisen in Zona Table of Ranks

the wearer of the tattooed skin was. The inmates with life terms were distinguished by the tattoos on their foreheads running "Slave of the USSR".

But then again, not all were the same. One of my buddies returned from Zona with neat 3 words on his forearm in quite a modest typeface – 'in vino veritas'. With such a tattoo one easily may pass off for a Philosophy Doctor. Some fucking Latinist…

There were certain taboos too. An attempt at exaggeration of personal achievements by means of a tattoo faking his status in the criminal milieu by ornamentations which he was not entitled to, called for a severe, brutal—at times the capital—punishment.

And one should also be careful about using the word "waffles". After we got that half-ripped-off payment, Alimosha visited the hut of Military Store by the gate and, pointing his finger at a pack of waffles, asked the saleswoman, "Gimme of those grid biscuits." Yet, the trick did not save him.

"Hey, Alimosha! Got missing waffles, eh?"

"Go and fuck yourself!" snapped Alimosha back.

The innocent word of "waffles" in Zona cant became "sperm swallowed at doing head", thence the pun.

> (...and how not to come to admiration, not to arose emotionally, from the unpretentiously artless, but so poetically provocative, mocking couplet-duels of the Zona folklore?
>
> ***" I have fucked you at the gate,***
>
> ***And can present the certificate!.."***
>
> ***"I have fucked you in the grass dew,***
>
> ***Here's the reference for you!.."***
>
> ***"I have fucked you in the raspberries***
>
> ***With all of your references!.."***

Then, stomping the final, victorious, period:

" No trumps? No ace?

Grab my dick and wipe your face!.."...)

Besides play on words, there happened practical jokes as well... After the midday meal, we were standing by the gate waiting for the truck. Sasha Khvorostyuk and Vitya Strelyany had razor-shaved their heads the night before and stood out among us with white-skinned pates above their densely tanned mugs.

"I say, would I look a dick if there was a scratch across my pate now?" asked me Vitya.

"No worry, buddy, you look it just as is with no scratch at all."

"Do me a favor, grab my ears and jerk it. Please, O, please!"

Who would refuse so earnest appeal of a buddy? Naturally, I did as asked.

"Ptui-ptui-ptui-ptui...."

I did not get it immediately – the white saliva of tiny spits dribbled on my tunic chest.

"I cum..." explains Vitya...

A truck pulls up by the checkpoint with a team-squad of plasterers of our draft, but from Dnepropetrovsk. They walk thru the open gate. Five *dippers* shoot from the checkpoint door besetting a mighty *young*, like a pack of wolves hunting a bull.

But no, he turns out a too hard prey for them, and the pack retreats uttering threats. The bull picks up his cap knocked off in the skirmish.

We kept the policy of non-interference to the internal affairs of Third Company. The driver of the arrived truck honked us to climb into the back…

~ ~ ~

The walls of the nine-story building were laid even at night in the light from a garland of electric bulbs suspended above the wall-portion-in-progress. Two soldiers from our draft were transferred to the night shift – a lanky buddy who worked as a bricklayer before the army, and me.

He was immediately integrated into the line of the servicemen laying the brick-course, and I got a shovel to bring the mortar, aka "dirt", from a nearby iron box and splash it onto the growing wall.

Outside the other wall in the dark of night, there loomed the motionless tower crane with the dim spot of the soldier operator's face in his cab below the crane-beam.

The bricklayers, in turn, entreated the operator to hoist a kettle of drinking water for them, but he was too lazy to climb all the way down the ladder inside the crane's tower and back up again because there was no one down there to fill the kettle with water from the water pipe by the mound of mortar on the ground.

Finally, one of the bricklayers climbed on a pallet with bricks, grabbed the steel cables of the "spider" (the bundle of four steel cables donned on the crane's main hook) and stepped up onto two smaller spider hooks hanging by idly.

The operator switched on the wail-and-rumble of his crane, raised and turned away the beam, carrying the figure standing on the hooks far down, where a lonely light-bulb outlined the mortar mound. (Safety regulations? The royal troops lived by the concepts of their own.)

From down there, the crane brought a pallet of bricks with the filled kettle atop. The pallet was put by the wall between the working bricklayers, then they commanded the operator to take the cables away.

One of the spider's hooks caught the young bricklayer, stooping over the wall with a trowel in his hand, by his belt cinched over the pea-jacket, and lifted him into the air.

The rise was not extremely high – about a meter or so, because of the whistles and cries from all the sides calling to put him back down.

The operator executed the command and the incident was over, but what did the buddy live thru while hanging up in the air and kicking his long legs and shouting "enough! enough!"?

> (...probably, it happened just by chance, because the *grandpas* in the line were also shouting "down!" to the operator...)

Then the bricklayers' Sergeant-foreman went to the far corner of the erected section, stood on the wall edge and took a leak down onto the distant remnants of the windbreak belt, in an arc-shaped glinting squirt of dashes reflecting the bulb-garland lights.

> ***"There's no nicer sight***
>
> ***Than when you piss from the hight.."***

He jumped off the corner and joined the bricklayers' line to go on with laying the wall…

Not always though everyone got off nice and cozy with anything at all...

In the broad daylight, two soldiers grabbed each other in a mock-wrestling over the elevator shaft. Or rather, the bigger guy grabbed the smaller one; hefty yokels are more prone to that kind of horse-playing.

They both fell into the shaft and the safety boarding one story lower did not withstand the impact. Due to the law of acceleration for bodies in free fall, the bigger buddy was the first to reach the bottom of the shaft and got flattened against the piles of construction debris down there.

The smaller guy came to a second later landing on the jellied body of the late joker and got off with heavy fractures. After the rehabilitation, he was not exempted though and served until his demobilization as a watchman at various construction sites of VSO-11…

Every other month at the Morning Dispensing, they were reading up the circulation orders about servicemen killed as a result of the malicious violation of safety regulations in the military construction units of the Baku Air Defense District, which our construction battalion reported to…

~ ~ ~

All the *youngs* starting their service got "burdened", but our squad was the "youngest" of all the *youngs*, which situation resulted from a chain of unfavorable circumstances.

Firstly, the Ensign, who was our platoon commander, caught the Sergeant, who was our squad commander, with 2 bottles of wine bought from a nearby deli.

What is Ensign? That's a *grandpa* who liked thief-swaggering (wow! the *youngs* got cold feet before him!) and got brains enough to realize that in civilian life, after the demobilization, he'd be a sheer nothing.

(...the civilian life has other kinds of hierarchies...)

That's why such a *grandpa* stays in the army for long-term service. After 4 months of training at a school of Ensigns, he comes back to the same detachment with a small star in his shoulder-straps. He wears the parade-crap all the time, he roughs the soldiers and is paid for his favorite pastime one hundred twenty rubles a month. How not to sympathize with a person who has found his place in life?

So, our squad was called and collected from different spots at the nine-story building construction site, some of us were laying partition walls, others digging a trench, still others loading bricks on pallets before we were ordered to fall in by the entrance to the second section.

Our Sergeant was facing the line without his belt on—the obvious mark of a serviceman under arrest—2 bottles of wine (0.5 liters, wide red sticker) next to his feet on the ground. The fair-haired Ensign in a short-sleeved parade-crap shirt (the summer had just started) took the position at the flank of our dust-covered-mud-crusted formation.

In short, that whelp, who was not even a *grandpa* already, decided to perform a didactic oratorio. Like, this traitor of our great Homeland treacherously left his comrades-in-arms at their labor post and deserted to the grocery store, yet the vigilant Ensign caught him red-handed... He finished his piece of bullshit, snuffed and didn't know what to do next. However, he seemed to have watched some TV sequel from the life of military cadets, where someone got a parcel mailed from home and ate it on the sly, without sharing with his buddies. Then he got caught, and the cadet school zampolit forced him to eat a bar of chocolate in front of the rank of his comrades. The miser with his head bowed, burning with shame, implored to forgive him. To be continued...

Well, now, that Pestalozzi with a scrawny star in his shoulder-straps, started to peacock himself for the TV zampolit before us, "And you let your comrades down for wine! Well, well...So drink it!" He did not consider that in real life flicks might go the way bypassing the staple TV ruts...

Instead of bowing his head, the Sergeant threw it back, clapped the bottle's neck to his lips and executed the received order. The Ensign froze in his place, the lined-up audience sympathetically swallowed along with the Sergeant's gulps and the bottle was slugged down at one go. He did not have time for the second one though – the Ensign recovered his senses, sprinted to the bottle and smashed it against a heap of gravel.

The Sergeant was taken to the detachment and locked up in the clink at the checkpoint guardhouse. The next morning, he was busted to a private and sent to the team he had been working with before they brought our draft to VSO-11. And might it possibly be otherwise? Who would allow him to kick back in the clink for 10 days and chew bread for nothing? March to work! We've got so all-embracing five-year plan designed by the Party and Government. After all, both with and without the instructive tattoo on our foreheads, all of us were slaves of the USSR…

Our squad got a new commander, just a *dipper*, by the name of Prostomolotov. "Call me simply – Molotov."

An intellectual wearing glasses, he knew about Molotov, but he was nothing more than a *dipper* and though they soon gave him the rank of Lance-Corporal, the *grandpas* were pushing him around, and he was in cold sweat before them, and never suggested to "burden", at least occasionally, some other squad of *youngs*, for a change. Because of such a situation, after a day's work instead of going to bed, we were assigned to the kitchen detail and peeled potatoes for the next day feeding of the entire servicemen personnel plus that of Separate Company because the peeling machine broke... Peeled all night long. Until 5 in the morning.

True, the last sack of potatoes we smuggled in portions out to the garbage bins, covering the out-going pailfuls with the peels from processed potatoes so that the on-duty cook did not get it. And at 6 – "get up!", then the Morning Dispensing and – march to work!.

Or else, they brought us in the evening from work to have the *havvage*—quick!—and then took back to the nine-story building, because KAMAZ trucks were moving alabaster there from the railway station, and if it rained the whole carload of the valuable building material would be lost.

And we, standing knee-deep in loose alabaster, drove it with shovels into the basement of the nine-story building thru the opening in the blocks of the foundation under the butt wall. As soon as we finished one hillock of it, another KAMAZ truck would come and dump its 13-tonne load, and then another and then another, a practical way to learn that a railway freight car capacity is 68 tonnes... And inside the basement, the alabaster had to also be driven into the next compartment, otherwise, all of it just wouldn't fit in.

> (...no horror film can hold a candle to the lividly lurid complexion of Vasya, drafted from Buryn, when he dozed off on an alabaster dune smack under the feeble light bulb...)

In short, Simply-Molotov, the popular conbat saying was right: "It's better to have a prostitute daughter than a Lance-Corporal son."

Daddy of Grisha Dorfman arrived and had a talk with someone in the Staff barrack and when he left Grisha was transferred to Fourth Company and given the position of the tailor. Soon, Grisha already flaunted in "Pe-Sha" and didn't even spend nights in the barracks because he had a sewing workshop in the bathhouse building.

"Pe-Sha" meant an outfit of half-woolen cloth, which was thicker than cotton fabric, aka "Khe-Be", and had the color of dark swampy slime – one of the khaki shades. "Pe-Sha" was the dress-code of aristocrats among the rank-and-file servicemen: the driver of the Battalion Commander's "goat"-Willys, or the projectionist at the Club, who was also the postman. It's a great thing to have a daddy who knows how to negotiate…

And Vanya, scared by the mice in his high boots, got exempted from the army. The Sergeant, who escorted him home from the nuthouse, told that at the Stavropol railway station Vanya dropped the mesh-bag with his belongings wrapped in a newspaper to the floor and screamed, "Run! Get off! It's a bomb! It's ticking!" Sure enough, folks shied away. And on the arrival in Vanya's home, he said his escort for a goodbye, "Learn, Sergeant, the way smart guys serve in the army."

That's, in general, why on that first day-off in August, trying to eschew the lazy crowd of beach-lizards in *kirza* high boots, I turned round the corner of the Club and from the rebar-grated window, next to the steps under the closed door of the projectionist's, I heard an acoustic guitar. Guitar…

I stood still and listened, though there was nothing to listen to – someone clumsily tried to play the chords of "Shyzgara", yet did not go well with the rhythm because of using balalaika beat. Unable to stand it, I returned to the Club entrance door. It was open.

At the end of the hall, on both sides of portholes from the projectionist's, there were two doors. The left one stood wide open and it was where the guitar sounded from. The grated window in a narrow room was abutted by a wooden hospital couch seated by a soldier with beastly bristles, in a faded piss-cutter, black overalls, and slippers who kept the guitar in his paws.

Another soldier, also in slippers, sat opposite him on a chair with its backrest against the wall.

"What's your fucking need here?"

"It's by "Shocking blue" that you wanna play, I can show how."

They exchanged glances. "Okay, show."

> (… "beauty will save the world..." Well, no one can say for sure. The thing is way too vague, that elusively meaningful 'beauty'.
>
> Music is much more tangible. It can do wonders and work miracles as well as create bridges canceling all that's vain and unimportant.
>
> Instead of a *pheasant* (Y. Zameshkevich), a *dipper* (V. Rassolov), and a *salaga* (S. Ogoltsoff) there remained just three young fellas passing the guitar from hands to hands...)

A couple of days later, a *young* from Dnepropetrovsk knocked in the tin-veneered door with his fingers eaten by plastering lime "dirt". The musician Alexander Roodko, who in his civilian life worked as a bass guitarist at the regional Philharmonics. That is how started up the creation of the VIA Orion in our construction battalion, based on the equipment and instruments left after the servicemen from previous years.

The guys went to the Stuff barrack, they talked to Zampolit of the VSO-11. Alexander was appointed Director of the Club. But he never got himself a "Pe-Sha" outfit, and he spent nights in the barrack of Second Company and stood at the evening roll-calls there...

He knew the musical notation; he played on anything that would turn up. He taught us the warm-up chant of "mi-me-ma-mo-mu" and he blinked, painfully and mutely, thru his cloudy blue gaze at my crap in singing.

He had a big nose constantly swollen with rhinitis, and he burred. But he was the Musician…

And I started to lead a double life. After the working day and *havvage* at the Canteen, I was taking the left turn, to the Club...

"May I join the ranks, Comrade Master Sergeant?"

"Why late for the evening roll-call, Ogoltsoff?"

"I was at the Club."

"And what do you, Club-goers, exercise there?"

In the ranks, sounds snickering supportive of the hint.

"We exercise solfeggio there, Comrade Master Sergeant."

The commander's face stiffens stupidly, he's never heard such words in all his life. Chuckles in the ranks increase in volume, yet now in the opposite direction.

"Battalion Zampolit is aware of it, Comrade Master Sergeant."

"Get to the ranks, suffle... sulge... Son of a bitch!"

But during the working day, I was like anyone else... We were transferred to the five-story building construction site in its concluding pre-delivery phase. Vitya Novikov and Valik Nazarenko called me to an empty apartment. They had a bottle of wine to share. We finished it drinking, in turn, from the neck. A forgotten buzz. Everything was gone before the evening roll-call because what was there for three of us?

At the evening roll-call, Captain Pissak sent the on-duty private to the Dishwashers' to fetch a washed-up cup for breath alcohol testing. Moving along the rank, Pissak selectively handed the cup those soldiers he cared to check, commanded them to exhale into it and sniffed the content. Soon, a couple of servicemen were ordered out of the ranks and face about.

When he handed the cup to me, I realized that I was fucked up beyond salvation even before the test. The uncontrollable waves of chill and heat were rolling, in turn, over, telling on me. For the loosened belt on my outfit, he had ordered me five fatigues, and now I was fucked up totally. Pissak sniffed out from the cup, sadistically downed his gaze and announced, "Well, I say, if a soldier hasn't drunk you can see it at once."

After the evening roll-call, Vitya Strelyany told me with a smile, "You were whiter than the fucking wall." As if I did not know that myself! Pissak, bastard! What the fucking games at cat-and-mouse?.

~ ~ ~

It was hard to believe, but there came another day-off. In the evening they showed a movie, some Polish one called "The Anatomy of Love" with certain hints at eroticism. Maybe in Poland, there were more than just hints, but before reaching us it had been shortened by repeated cut-outs. There was a whole pack with scissors, starting from the censorship down to acned projectionists, snatching out whole pieces of film wherever there flashed bare tits in a frame. For special friends and personal use. Fucking morons.

The next morning in the line of leak-takers alongside the *sorteer* runnel, I gave my cock the thoughtful shake to shed off final drops and silently addressed it in my mind, inaudibly in the general hubbub, "That's it, buddy, for the two-year stretch you're just a drain cock." And I buttoned the fly up.

At work, we were removing construction debris and excess earth out of the basement with the stretchers, it's called "doing the planning". All of the buddies looked somehow sullen, kept silently introvert, the after-effect, so to say, of that Polish film.

At a smoke break I, having nothing better to do, began to get at Alimosha. He did not talk back replying with brief fuck-offs but then suddenly jumped to his feet and pounced at me with his fists. I had to brush off as best as I could, yet, as always, not too proficiently.

Then Prostomolotov dropped into the basement and shouted to stop, so we again took up the stretchers. When doing my turns, I noticed that the pain in my right hand was not going to cease. Something happened to my thumb hit against the Tatar-Mongolian mug of Alimosha...

The next morning my entire hand was swollen, and after the Morning Dispensing the Assistant Paramedic from the Detachment Medical Unit (that same villager from our draft, but already in "Pe-Sha" outfit) took me to the Stavropol Military Hospital. We reached the city on some team-squad truck and there got on a bus because the city public transport served soldiers for free.

When we arrived in the hospital, he told me to wait and entered some of the buildings. The grounds looked quite attractive with a lavish garden of yellow Plum trees. Yet, I did not have the appetite for them because my hand hurt, so I just got seated on a bench in the green alley between the buildings and fell asleep. Opening my eyes, I got a smack bang close-up of some round muzzle with long cat-like mustache, right next to my nose. I startled, but the bench back safely kept me from falling. Another glance disclosed Captain's shoulder-straps on the cat. Everything got radiant clear – seeing a soldier dozing on the bench, the officer stooped for the alcohol breath test.

Then my escort came out and led me to another building for the hand check. They twirled my thumb, and I hissed like a gander and slapped my other hand against my left side, like a broken wing. From those indications they diagnosed a bone fracture, bandaged the hand, plastered it with gypsum and left me in hospital. Thank you, Alimosha!. Yet, washing the face with one hand was fairly inconvenient…

What could be better than a fracture? No jabs at all, just kick back and wait until the bone tissue grows over. In the dining room, there were square tables for just four persons and chairs instead of benches. The *havvage* also was much better than in our Canteen. Quite understandable though, because the hospital treated officers as well. Of course, all patients wore pajamas with no insignia, only the wards for officers were on the second floor and those for soldiers in the basement. Who cares if there’s a bed to sleep at any time of day? Besides, the dining room was nearer to us – in the end of the corridor.

The hospital was a quiet place and anything but overcrowded. In my wardroom, apart from me and a Georgian named Rezo, there were four vacant beds. The Rezo's black hair was long enough to be combed back, an obvious mark of a *grandpa*. He kept his left arm tightly pressed against his chest which attitude resulted from his patronizing help as a driver at wheat harvesting in some steppe kolkhoz. In the field camp, he started fooling around with the cook, and her husband stabbed him in the back with a large kitchen knife, and now the cook kept visiting the

sufferer at the hospital. They usually went down the abundant garden, and coming back from there Rezo was offering me yellow plums from the pocket of his pajamas jacket, but I had no appetite although my hand didn't hurt already...

The neighbor wardroom was filled up though. One of the patients there was from our construction battalion, also a *grandpa* like Rezo only a Russian, named Sanya. Besides, his hair was fair and his right brow missing, licked off with a flat scar. He was a driver too and went AWOL by his tractor and collided somewhere with something, or maybe capsized. They had to amputate both his legs above the knees.

He did not visit the dining room. They buddies from his room were bringing the *havvage* directly onto his closet-box, although he had crutches and a pair of high leg prostheses next to his bed. On the front cover of *The Rural Life* magazine, he liked the picture of a shock worker of Communist Labor from Stavropol against the background of her combine harvester and wheat ears, and started writing letters to her. "Hello, unknown Valentina..."

Sometimes his fellow-drivers from our conbat came to visit him. After their closed-door meetings, he screamed songs and quarreled with the on-duty medical personnel. But he got off with it because they would exempt him from the army anyway…

On the second floor, there was a library, sort of, because its two shelves were filled with only translations from Chinese novelists about how socialism was being built in the villages of China. The books were printed in the fifties' before the exposure of the personality cult at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. To wit, before Mao Tse-Tung took offense for disparaging his bosom friend Generalissimo Stalin, and in both great powers they stopped singing:

"Moscow – Beijing,

Eternal friendship..."

And what would you do when left with no choice? You'd go and read social realism masterpieces in the best tradition of the newspaper Renmin Ribao…

A commotion broke up in the next wardroom, splashing out into the corridor – the combine driver Valentina answered Sanya's letters by her live visit. She got seated in the yard, on a bench under a tree. A swarthy-faced woman of Moldovian type, beautiful as movie stars from the first Soviet color flicks about collective farms in the Cossack villages. The most handsome buddy-patient from the neighbor wardroom alighted by her side with explanations that Sanya would presently come from a medical procedure.

And Sanya, in hysterical jitters, was sitting on his bed in the ward, fastening his prostheses. They helped to pull his pajama pants over them, and, sticking two crutches in his armpits, he clumsily dragged his body to the exit door. But Valentina—well done!—for whole 3 minutes she sat next to him on the bench that he finally reached. Then the same handsome buddy led her along the shortcut path to the unofficial exit thru a hole in the fence…

Two days later along the same path...I watched and I couldn't get it… It just couldn't be! But who else was that if not Olga?!. Yes, it's she!.

The same evening, I went with her to the park in her trousers and some sort of a turtleneck while she, sure thing, had her mini skirt on.

On the dance-floor, a pack of local yobbos started to close in, probably, attracted by the pattern of huge yellow flowers all over my borrowed pants. A couple of *dippers* on AWOL from our conbat had identified me and approached. One of them rigged out with a civilian *citizenka* and the second was in a "Pe-Sha" outfit, I didn't even know their names. The locals got it that the construction battalion was having a pleasure-walk and dissolved…

Olga had a whole heap of news in her life. She had again moved to Theodosia, but in the day nursery there were no places for babies. So she took Lenochka and went to the city executive committee on the chairman's reception day.

He parroted the same thing – there were no places and that's it. Then she just put Lenochka on his desk and walked out, he ran after her to the stairs, "Citizen! Take your baby!" In short, they found a place.

Her mother was looking after Lenochka, while she went to Stavropol, only on the train they stole all her money. And my wedding ring was also gone. But it happened still back in Konotop. She was wearing it on her finger though it was too wide and when washing she did not notice that it slipped off into the basin, and she splashed it away with the soapy water into the drain pit...

The next day she borrowed money for her back travel from the cook, who came to visit Rezo, and walked away down the same shortcut path…

They took the plaster off my hand and discharged me. By free of charge trolleys I traveled to the south-eastern outskirts of Stavropol and from the ring road there walked on under the tall roadside trees bordering the highway to Elista, towards the Demino fork.

Bright yellow leaves scattered the ground here and there, the sun was shining, yet it felt like it was autumn already. But when was the summer?

One of the conbat trucks pulled up on the highway. The driver shouted to me, "Home?"

I said, yes, home, and jumped into the truck bed. Because neither from work, nor from AWOL's we never returned "to the detachment", or "to the barracks". We were coming back “home”…

~ ~ ~

At home, it wasn't without news too. During my absence, our squad lived thru a rampage of torturing humiliation at the hands of *grandpas* who drove them after the lights-out out the barrack to the drill grounds and they had to walk "goose step" in a circle before getting beaten.

Karlookha from Second Company was particularly atrocious – he liked to jab a *young* with the knife, not so as to stab but aggravate by pricking. And he himself was just a dwarf, half-head lower than normal human height. Then in the basement of the 50-apartment block, he rushed with his knife on Sehrguey Chernenko, handled Gray, from Dnepropetrovsk. But Gray had his Zona skills for such incidents and knocked him out. Karlookha thief-swaggered only on the grounds of being a *grandpa*, but those *grandpas* from his draft, who had done their time before the army, hadn't supported him against Gray. So everything, like, subsided but the tension held on.

On the wave of that suspended tension, some *pheasant* clung to me, "Are you from thieves?"

Answering such a question in affirmative, you had to make it clear which stretch the prosecutor demanded for you and what was the final verdict, but for me the articles of the Penal Code were as closed a book as formulas from Organic Chemistry. Saying "yes' without having done some time, you became an impostor from the view-point of Zona code, liable to hard consequences.

So I said "no" and he took me to the Leninist Room and began to shear my hair in a "zero-like" style with a hand-held machine – the length of my hair was a crying impudence for a young. I did not mind though, it had 2 years ahead to grow back. However, the machine was blunt and a couple of times it pulled very painfully.

There was a plasterer from Third Company in the Leninist Room, who came to see his Armenian buddies-countrymen. So, he suggested the home-made barber letting him finish my haircut. The *pheasant* himself was not already happy that he started that job, and yielded the machine to him.

In short, Robert Zakarian did my haircut, and when the machine jammed he said, "I am sorry". I had completely forgotten there were such words in existence…

Later, Robert started visiting the Club and became a vocalist at The Orion. He had the purest Russian pronunciation because he grew up in the Far North where his father served his time in a camp, convicted of dissidence or something of the sort. When the old man was paroled to "chemistry" in the same region, Robert's mother moved there too, taking Robert and his younger brother north, far away from Armenia.

With his stretch completed, Robert's father applied for emigration of his family from the Soviet Union. Two years passed, and he passed away before they gave permission.

There remained some time before the fixed date of their departure, and Robert went to spend it by his Armenian relatives in the seaside city of Sochi. There he met a Russian girl Valya from the Tula city and fell in love. They exchanged their addresses and, on his return to the north, Robert bleared out that he refused to leave the Soviet Union.

Yet, the papers were drawn up already for the whole family and, without him, his mother and brother would not be let out. The brother tried to make him understand the situation by fighting him, yet Robert daringly maintained his intentions to keep true his promises to his dear beloved.

Then the mother began crying on a daily basis and, eventually, he landed with them in Paris by their Armenian relatives because of whose invitation they were let out.

In Paris, he found a job at a construction site. He did not know the language, he had no friends, and all his dreams were only of Valya from Tula…

A year later, with a tourist group from France, Robert Zakarian came to Moscow, and the very first night, he slipped out the hotel which his group was accommodated at and scurried to the Tula city. For 10 days he lived there in the house of Valya's parents before her mother persuaded him to give himself up to the authorities.

When he turned up in the Tula KGB, the officers there were simply delighted because their bosses in Moscow were all horns and rattles about the disappearance of a tourist from Paris. He was immediately taken to the airport and deported to France.

In Paris, he requested the Soviet Embassy to let him back to the USSR, to his beloved. And then he kept visiting them every week, and the embassy clerk, with a tattoo "Tolik" on his hand, was shaking his head and saying there was no answer to his appeal... It took Tolik about a year to nod, at last, instead of shaking because there had come a positive response.

Robert arrived in Tula, married Valya, they had a baby daughter, and he was drafted to our construction battalion. He liked to show a black-and-white photograph of his family: he himself on the left, black-haired, with a serious look in the wide-set eyes below the broad black eyebrows of an unquestionably family man; his wife Valya, on the right, in a white blouse and fair curls about her round face; the baby-daughter, in between the two, in a fancy cap of fine lace. So, the contingent of our construction battalion comprised not only cripples and jail-birds, we even had a double migrant in our ranks…

On the Seventh of November, The Orion gave their first concert on the VSO-11 Club stage. The drums were knocked and kicked at by Vladimir Karpeshin, handled Karpesha. Vladimir Rassolov and Robert Zakarian provided lead vocals. Alexander Roodko sang along with them and played the bass guitar; I kept silent and played the rhythm guitar.

In our vocal-instrumental ensemble, there also was a horn player, Kolya Komissarenko, handled Commissar, a short, dark-haired guy from Dnepropetrovsk of a cheerfully Jewish appearance. He played very diligently, yet did no better than I in my singing. Every crap note by the horn obviously tormented Roodko who still and all kept putting up with it. Probably, the presence of a horn player on stage tickled his nostalgia for his Philharmonic past. To hear less clam, he time and again cut the horn part shorter and shorter…

For the concert, we changed into parade-crap (three of us into that from strangers because a conbatist got his parade-crap only after 1 year of service). The first number in the concert was "The Wide, Wide Field" song (sort of a patriotic one). Roodko dreamed of making it with a four-part vocal harmony like that by The Pesnyary, but because of the limited range of the vocalists' sound and the crappy clams from the Commissar's horn (at which he goggled his beady eyes out in outright amazement but still blew on) this philharmonic piece of shit was almost booed at.

However, Robert Zakarian got a warm applause for his number (sort of a lyrical one). He performed the adaptation of the French song, the air of which was year after year used by the Central Television News Program "Time" when announcing the weather forecast.

"Yes, I can forgive you all

And let to the sky like a bird free of thrall..."

The servicemen of Caucasian nationalities (mostly from Separate Company) enthusiastically met the song "Eminnah" performed by Vladimir Rassolov (sort of an Eastern-comical one).

"Under the burka of your girlfriend

There's no girlfriend but your Granddaddy.

Uh, Eminnah!.."

And the song "The Rains" from the repertoire of Fofik (The Orpheuses at DK KEMZ, Konotop) was awarded a unanimous ovation (sort of the hit of season).

However, in the oral review delivered by Battalion Zampolit, aka the Political Deputy Commander of VSO-11, after the concert in the close circle of the musicians, the final song received the lowest rating. "Roodko, those fucking "Rains" of yours have already drenched everyone fucking thru and thru."

He made a sugary-nasal voice meaning everyday start-up pop stars, "Rains again.... but you wait for me.... no, I won't wait.... fuck off, you stupid fucker..."

We couldn't help laughing. That particular song was heard by Zampolit for the first time in his life but he accurately grasped the essence of lyrics in the musical mass production of that sort.

"I'll pass thru any rains

Because I'm loving you! Uh-uh!.."

~ ~ ~

And again our team-squad saw the rotation of commander. Prostomolotov got transferred back to his previous squad without demotion from the Lance-Corporal rank though because he wasn't caught at anything. His clash of personalities with the Ensign, the platoon commander, became the reason for the shuffle. He, most likely, at some point, was not careful enough to keep back his intellectual superiority over the Ensign. "Thief-swaggering" was the conbat term to denote that kind of behavior of the sort.

Alik Aliyev, an Azerbaijani in the slinky pants of pheasantly upgraded outfit, came in his place. He was a slim tall guy with a beautiful round face in which a thin clean skin tightly fitted his high cheekbones and the well-developed jaw.

A week later he was promoted to the rank of Lance-Corporal. For that ceremonial occasion, Alik Aliyev ordered our squad-team to fall in, clapped his hands (the right fist into the opposite palm) and announced, full of bubbling delight, "I would-a fuckan!"

But he somewhat hurry-scurried in his predictions and joyful expectations. There were no less tall but more emotionally reserved privates in our squad, who quietly shared with the Lance-Corporal their concepts (which he understood and accepted) that if people who got to the construction battalion after doing their times in Zona still did not thief-swagger, then for him, who was honored to become a conbatist simply on the grounds of insufficient fluency in Russian, moderation and modesty were the ticket to not dented survival.

And about me personally, he never meant to be mean. While still a private man, he accidentally witnessed a situation in the Leninist Room of our Company when 2 senior servicemen from The Orion interpreted to Prostomolotov, the then commander of my squad-team, the postulate of the musicians being above the vanilla army relations as presented by the Statute of the Internal Military Service...

So we just did our job at work—digging, dragging, laying, hoisting—and after it, we got rest within the built-in limitations of construction battalion life.

Of course, we were not qualified to lie down on our beds in the *koobrik*s before the lights-out (that was the privilege of *grandpas*) but then there were stools along the aisle, as well as in the Leninist Room, so one could sit down and have a rest, because it was already too cold for sitting in the gazebo next to the entrance vestibule…

Then the winter began. We were given warm hats and scarcely padded khaki jackets. They pulled canvas tops over the truck beds by which we were taken to work, and also installed plank benches—from side to side—and now we rode not seated on our haunches…

In the blue darkness of starting night, our squad-team gathered after work at the foot of the nine-story building, but our truck was late. We even walked a little off to meet it on the other side of the windbreak belt remainder, and then some 100 meters more, to the sidewalk stretching towards the distant blocks of five-story buildings, with no passers-by at such an hour. There we formed a wide circle on the trampled snow, tap-taping one freezing boot against the other... Jokes, laughter, friendly jabs and claps on the shoulders – usual vivacity at the end of a usual working day before leaving for the usual *havvage* at the conbat Canteen.

I felt too bored by listening to the jokes heard before lots of times and walked back to the speck of light from a distant electric bulb on the butt wall of the nine-story building.

(...one of the ways to overcome the drag of time is fiddling about the accessible space...)

So, I padded back to from where we came, knowing that the team would not leave without me, as well as without a couple of *grandpa*-bricklayers who were still changing into their uniforms in the nine-story building... Boos, yells, and laughter of comrades died down behind... I walked in a measured step thinking of nothing.

> (...such reflections are also named "wistful yearnings of a soul", that is when you don't finalize your thoughts about anything specific, but still, for some reason, feel sort of blues...)

On entering the leftovers of the forest belt, I, like, heard a call muffled by the distance between me and the spot in space from where someone called me.

I switched over to here-and-now, and reluctantly looked back over my shoulder just in time to see the rear side of the truck rushing on me. It was too late for a jump aside, though I instinctively bent my legs to hit the road. And that initial tilting in the direction of the intended jump saved me – the bat of the truck rear side completed the started move and threw me away under the tree, instead of toppling onto the road, under the huge wheels of the vehicle...

"We kept shouting to warn you," said Vitya Strelyany, as we rode home. Well, I donno. All I heard was just one call and from really very far... My right shoulder hurt for a couple of days…

~ ~ ~

At the end of December, our squad-team was transferred to the construction site of a multi-apartment building. Or rather to the initialization of that site. There was just a deep pit still empty of any foundation blocks with a short length of tower crane tracks alongside the excavation and the crane itself standing idly over the wide rectangular crater.

Ah, yes, there also was a tin-roofed trailer made of planks with a door and two windows, taken off its wheels and put on the ground by the pit.

We got a clear-cut task – to dig the trench for the sidewall foundation blocks because the wall, as it turned out, should pass two meters closer to the trailer, kinda adding to the project's width. The reason was that at digging out the foundation pit, they omitted to observe that the building would get sitting smack on the pipeline providing running water for a whole city neighborhood and any emergency caused by corrosion would turn the project into a Noah's arc were in made of wood. Now, they woke up and decided to slightly change the project’s location before it was started. And while they were figuring out this and that, winter came, frost struck and no backhoes could widen the foundation pit – the frozen ground was too hard for the excavator buckets, and therefore they brought us, the rescuers at unsolvable situations...

Half of the trailer was packed with brand-new shovels and bayonet spades, we even were given the unheard-of luxury – protective canvas mitts. Of course, the ground was too hard for any kind of spades, breakers were the must there. And they were also brought, a whole truckload of breakers, and dumped with clang-and-ding next to the trailer. Heavy, iron, a meter-and-half long, breakers, and their only weak point was in being self-made. At one of the local factories, they

took thick rebar rods, cut them into the pieces of proper length, hammered the rod ends in a smithy to make them pointed, and dumped by the pit.

However, the breaker should be smooth because that's a hand tool. Yet, rebar, which, actually, is intended for making reinforced concrete, bears frequent oblique scars for firmer merging with the cement slurry. Those scars, though rounded, would tear any mitts after a dozen strikes with the rebar-rod breaker against the ground, and then the make-believe handtool would start rubbing off the palm skin, however calloused and hardened it were. But if not we, then who else would defend our beloved Homeland from the plan-drawing ass-holes? Conbat would redress all faults and deal with any situation…

The wind, like a mongrel cut loose off its chain, tumbles in helter-skelter around, snaps at the loosened ear-flaps of our hats, whips their strings against the faces. Yet, the wind's main job is to drag along in its current the black and gray clouds tumbling and scudding as low as the cabin top of the tower crane. Because of those clouds, all around from morning to night drowns in gloomy twilight. To get warm there's the trailer heated with our breathing.

The mitts had long since got worn to tatters, we grab the frosty rebar-rods with the rags found in the trailer. A strike of the rebar breaker against the frozen ground cleaves off a sliver of it hardly bigger than a walnut; then another splinter, and one more.

With his back to the wind, your partner waits for you to break away a shovelful of chips for him to scrape them off and throw away. Then you change each other... As Vitya Strelyany cared to put it:

> ***"We were brought to Stavropol***
>
> ***To dig and shovel the ground,***
>
> ***But it is so fucking hard,***
>
> ***Harder can't be found."***

> (...however, I entertain an unshared suspicion that it was an adaptation of a Zona couplet from the period of first five-year plans in the Soviet history, turned out in the mines of Donbas...)

But there's always a nook to feel happy in – oh, how sweet is dozing off when seated on the floor of the trailer with your back leaned against the backs of your comrades!

After half-day of breaking-scraping, we discovered that at the depth of half-meter-plus the permafrost transformed into the ground of almost equal hardness, yet yielding to the strikes with a bayonet spade. Three days later we developed the trench digging technique. First, you dig a hole meter-by-meter and two meters deep, then with an interval of one meter, you dig another such hole and connect these two by a burrow thru the softer ground at their bottoms under the bridging crust of frozen layer. The bridge is cinched about by the crane slings and you will

hollow out two grooves across the edges of the permafrost bridge until the crane power is enough to tear off and hoist the whole block of frozen ground. Ha! Fuck you, bitch!.

Yes, the construction battalion did it!. And although there remained many days of breaking and scraping to the very end of the trench, we won the day. We broke the backbone of the polar night twilight that had descended as far as the city of Stavropol…

Besides the trailer, you also could shelter from the frost in the staircase-entrances of the multi-apartment block on the other bank of the pit. Out of the piercing wind, a cigarette chiseled from a passer-by in a staircase could also warm you up...

While I was basking in the staircase-entrances, Alimosha and Novikov explored the surrounding territories and discovered a dairy factory there, as well a bakery plant. Just a question of climbing a pair of fencing walls. They returned swollen like balloons with cardboard half-liter pyramids of milk, and loaves of hot bread tucked under their padded jackets. Since that day we were sending foragers there. The workers of both enterprises allowed you to lift your loot directly from the production lines…

At times, we went out on the street to beg money from the passers-by. "Bro, 27 kopecks short of a bottle, can you help out?"... "Sister, 11 kopecks for a pack of "Belomor", eh? Two days without a smoke.."

Alimosha explained the nuances to me. Never address the pensioner oldies – no go, and they might even start to yell. Asking for a round sum was also a mistake; instead of 27 he would give you at least 30, and instead of 11 you'd get 15 kopecks.

What the money for? Well, instead of 9-kopeck shag, or bitter "Pamir" for 11 kopecks, you could buy Cuban "Portugas", aka "the thermonuclear", or that same "Prima" again; but not Indian "Red and White" – a sour crap in golden-foil wrappers. And sometimes we drink wine too; to drive away fatigue and flush down the snack from the bakery plant.

Oh, how low I fell! Cadging on the street! Where's my decency, my self-esteem? How could I possibly not die of shame?

> (...well, firstly, in our cant there was a more precise term for that activity: we were not cadging, but jackalling.
>
> As for my decency and self-esteem whereabouts, they're always by me only their shape vacillate unlike some rigidly constant values as that of never-ending Pi we were taught at school for I don’t know what purpose.
>
> And in regard to shame, I'm probably a pervert here. I feel more ashamed of robbing that Whatman paper tophat from credulous Valya Pisanko, than of receiving soiled coppers in my capped palm from the passers-by.

> And even though I might, at certain points, be a noble man, yet, on the whole, I'm anything but a Spanish grandee, and you can safely take my word for it...)

In February, the bread-and-butter carnival was over; we were transferred to the construction of the Medical Center whose basement was already bridged over with concrete flooring slabs, but not completely. Underneath those slabs, we were hiding from the winter wind around a fire built of any lumber or raw-timber we came across and split with the breakers because there was no trailer to shelter in.

The territory of the future Medical Center were vast indeed, but being on the city outskirts it provided no hunting grounds for jackalling...

The trucks for our transportation to work and back all were from a local motor depot manned by the civvy drivers... Ours was a hairy asshole. He flew into the grounds of the would-be Medical Center on his UAZ-66, hit the brakes and the truck glided over the icy ground, turned around and stopped still – get in, off we go!

During the trick, the badly fixed, tattered, canvas top quacked and bubbled like a parachute in arms of a landed saboteur. The driver grinned his bad-teeth smile from under his thin mustache – he was in high spirits from that sort of gypsy romanticism.

The exhaust pipe of his truck was trained to give out loud bangs but he withheld the fun for riding along the city sidewalks, to rough the passers-by. Bang!!

"Oy, Mommy!"

The buddies tried to explain me about those engine backfire bangs and the carburetor, but such things always were above my head...

On one of the first days in the new place, I went to the wooden toilet on the frontier of the site territory. When urged to take a leak we loosened bowls at any nearby nook, so I wouldn't go that far for such a trifle. Yet, because of the frost using the detachment *sorteer* harbored not a little risk. The whole floor there became one solid yellow skating rink too slippery for walking and even when a-squatting over an *ochco* your high boots' treds slid slowly apart on the smooth ice...

While defecating at that faraway ruin of a toilet, I felt like having some odd auditory sensations. I kinda heard...well, not quite voices...rather, echoes of voices. A distant, cohesive buzz of voices, some low even hum with no splashes nor distinct words.

Then I took a letter from the inside pocket of my outfit jacket, which I never re-read but kept on me. Without looking who the letter was from, I used it as toilet paper, stood up, buttoned my pants and suddenly saw the source of that noise.

The shabby walls and stall partitions were scratched in toto with inscriptions. Names, dates, settlement names were written and snicked, with pencils and ball pens. Some climbed on top of others because there was left no spare space around... The territory had obviously been used as

the Stavropol Collection and Distribution Point of Draftees, betcha, and they, already fallen thru into the two-year-long eternity, smitten, swept, engulfed by it, were hurriedly leaving on the deals in rotten whitewash their parting scratches:

> "Sakha, from the village..."
>
> "Athos, from the settlement..."
>
> "Drun, from the city..."

They were already there—swallowed up—because their voices were not heard, but turned into some mutual wordless hum, yet the hands were still finishing their farewell to themselves:

> "Andron, from..."
>
> (...in the construction battalion, the universal urge to leave a meme of oneself does not disappear, but becomes anonymous. You would not see there the classical "Vasya was here", they used one, common, mark for all at once:
>
> "Orel, DMB-73".
>
> Read it as, "Drafted from the Orel-City (or region) demobilized in 1973".
>
> With graphite, chalk, paint on walls, on pipes, on the tin, on anything. In every construction site or building erected by the Stavropol Construction Battalion about a year or two before 1973, there was such a mark.
>
> Then there came Tula, DMB-74 .
>
> The time would come for Sumy, DMB-75 , and Dnepr, DMB-75 but it still was so far away...)

~ ~ ~

The Orion took part in the city musical contest. We performed 2 numbers there without securing any place. As it seemed, the whole affair was started for the sake of a local singer. A young guy could sing without a microphone filling the whole auditorium with his voice. That's some singer!

> (...I have never heard him any more neither on TV nor over the radio, they had no vacancies there, muslim magomaevs and iosif kobsons kept their positions for decades...)

The second of our numbers at the contest was "The Indian's Song" from the repertoire of Tom Jones. No one knew what about he sang in it, but in the Soviet adaptation the song bemoaned the bitter fate of American Redskins (as it turned out later, Tom had nothing to do with the song sung by Raiders):

"They took the whole Cherokee nation,

Put us on this reservation..."

At the contest, the Orion’s "brass" group comprised already two horn players. Ensign Jafar Jafarov had been transferred to our battalion I can't say where from or what for, because I didn't care. He came to the Club and announced that he was playing a horn…

Jafarov’s eastern appearance imparted a pleasant impression of softness. A rounded face with the soft swarthy skin, the soft glint in his black, olive-like, eyes, his soft smile when he uttered his, "I swear to you by my Mom!" And he really played the horn which he was bringing to the Club for the rehearsals and carrying away in an unexpectedly hard case... Kolya Commissar started to blow his horn much better with Jafar around...

Gray, the tamer of Karlookha, became a frequent visitor to the Club too, not as a musician though, just because it was a secluded spot in the everyday conbat life. At work, he fucked it all from the very beginning of his service and was just doing another two-year time at the construction battalion. As if it was much fucking different from a penitentiary colony… just that conditions were a bit easier and the *spetzovka* in khaki color instead of indigo.

Brought in the morning to a construction site, he ventured to the city and returned only for the evening truck home. At times, he was locked up in the clink, but even Battalion Commander, notwithstanding his chronic brain leakage, clearly realized that suchlike correctional efforts would be lost on that well-developed, stiff-lipped jail-bird. The bald patch of a scar in his left eyebrow somehow humanized the crisp face thrust in wolfy way forward from his broad shoulders... In his life, Gray was treading along the guilelessly straight, unpretentious, path of a hereditary thief.

At the Club, he shared stories of his recent adventures in the city, or roughed Commissar. That was not right, because both Commissar and he were from the same draft, but for Gray, the Zona Code overweighed that of the construction battalion.

On the eve of becoming a *pheasant*, Commissar decorated all of the rear of his right hand with a gaudy tattoo depicting a craggy ridge of fuzzy mountains and the sun rising from behind them in a spiky halo of sharp rays, and all that freshly shining world had a firm foundation of instructive inscription running below, "The Northern Caucasus". When on the stage, Commissar assumed such a stance that his tattoo would face the audience and, blowing his horn aloft, he squinted proudly at the sprawling masterpiece of an unknown author.

Probably, it went against Gray's grains that Commissar was swaggering with a more ostentatious splotch than his blueish spider-cross (a Zona sign for the initiated) hardly bigger than a ping-pong ball, which cheeky inequality, even in absence of any Zona regulations as regards geographical tattoos, provoked Gray's picking at the cheerful Hornblower.

(...however, wherever I use the word "probably" you don't have to take all that follows for its face value because there certainly might be other assumptions besides it. There can be a whole lot of variants and interpretations, but that "probably" sweeps them all aside and leaves just one, maybe not the truest to life.

Word requires a cautious approach. At times you blurt something out, like, say, "*lahboohs* (aka musicians) – are one family! We support each other like a wall!" just to run into nagging qualms: oops! I did it again...

Because all those general statements are good for slogans only, like: "Workers of all the countries – unite!"

Or else: "Bipeds! All you need is love!"

Such spiffy words work only until the common interests coincide with the interests of the given, individually taken, mammal but whenever the interests diverge then at once – you get along and let me alone...)

Let's take, for instance, that same Yura Zameshkevich. After locking up the stoker-house he came to the Club. The place where he would safely keep away from the eyes of Fathers Commanders, where he could strum a guitar, serenely drink a mug of *chiffeer* concocted in the Canteen kitchen (mix a 250 gr. pack of tea and 250 ml of water, bring to boiling) where he's one of us – a person of a subtle soul constitution, an exquisite connoisseur of the music which is something, a loyal friend, a reliable comrade, and simply a brother – a *lahbooh*, in a word.

But now his wife has arrived to visit him and waits in the checkpoint guardhouse, while he races around looking for a parade-crap and a greatcoat to go with her to the city. He gives his bristles a hasty shave, and gets the Leave Ticket at the Staff barrack, then for some reason drops to the Club with me sitting peacefully in the back row of the empty hall. He briskly jumps in and out of the musicians' and, leaving the Club, grabs my completely unaware cock and all in his bearish grip and raises me up in the air for a goodbye. Of course, I scream!

Then the pain gradually dissolves leaving behind inescapable puzzlement. What for?

(...I have found no answer in the writings of the naive primitivist Freud and his bro-scholars, neither in all the Upanishads and Bhagavatas, nor in Testaments, both Old and New, nor in Quran. Only in *The History of Russia from Ancient Times*, a brief passage mentioned the case of Dmitry the Pretender hiding at the back of the palace where a Cossack found him and, grabbing at his "secret knot", dragged the usurper out to the raging mob. But there at least you may trace a certain purpose for the deed, in contrast to Yura's... What was there for him in it?.

Some questions are beyond the power of human comprehension, we only can point at them for the edification of the inquisitive, and, with a sad shrug, spread our hands wide apart – alackaday! ‘tis beyond the human plumbing.

By the by, they have even invented a special scientific term for the like cases. When, say, you are so high and mighty that taking a leak you send forth a squirt powerful enough to bore thru a three-meter-thick layer of glacial ice, yes, quite in a breeze, before there suddenly pops up some crap that even you don't fucking know what the fuck it could possibly be at all. Know then that you've come across that very opaque doodad which by scientifically bent fobs is called transcendentalism...)

So, what else did we do in the Club besides solfeggio, rehearsals and surly contemplation of certain transcendental enigmas from all their respective angles?

Fooling around with *chiffeer* mentioned en passant? Its bitterness was a rare delicacy. And vodka happened hardly oftener…

We used a special code-knock at the door of the musicians' for a smooth admittance. To the right rhythm in your tap-tapping, the door would open, otherwise, go where you had come from, or shout thru the closed door what was your fucking message.

One time, after the right code and the click of the lock opening in response, the doorway was filled with the stubby figure of Zampolit, bodyguarded by the Ensign from Fourth Company who had tap-tapped the code, to be sure, the fucking excursion guide.

Our cook-vocalist Volodya Rassolov, handled Pickle, was fast and up to the situation: while the two officers gaped around what's what, he glibly slipped the bottle into the top of a *kirza* boot from the pair standing by his side. Of course, Zampolit labeled us a gang of drunkards and parasites all the same, but there was no direct evidence already…

But most of all we talked: who was what in his civilian life, what would he do coming back to it (we innocently believed then it was possible to come back anywhere at all in the stream of the flowing, ever changing space) and that Third Company went to kick the shit out of Separate Company, but the black-ass fuckers fought the assault back with their belt-plates, and the pigsty soldier-oversee seemed really be fucking his swine harem…

The champion of talking was, sure enough, Karpesha. In a hushed, brotherly confidential tone of voice, for hours would he spin a yarn about his ten-day furlough when he six times broke up and reconciled with the girl he dated, his former classmate...

Got bored with listening to the same minutiae for the seventh time? Go out into the empty Club hall, get seated next to Robert in the last row of seats, and welcome to the fluctuations of Parisian life. In Paris, everyone knew everything about anyone else. That, for example, Jean Marais was gay. And that's a pity, of course. Although I did not like him starring in "Fantômas", but as D'Artagnan in "The Iron Mask", he was the masculinity itself. That's what that fucking Paris was doing to even manly men…

Gray would share how he used to rough those in love, inadvertently passing along his street. Then he would go out of the wicket, and conversationally ask the guy, “So, what, Romeo? Wanna talk of love?” and cock up the trigger of his dad's shotgun. To which motion the asked,

neglecting the chanced discussion, would sprint away, but in fucking zigzags, sort of, while yelling over his shoulder the farewell instructions, "Run! Sveta, run!"

Or, for a change, how he battered his wife for the first time and the following morning she had Chink eyes…

And Jafarov, caressing thoughtfully the soft glitter of his horn, would narrate of when being still just a kid and "playing trash" at some party, he watched thru the key-hole a whore giving some officer a blow job, and then she returned to the hall and danced with someone else suck-kissing him, another officer of a higher rank than the previous one.

"But such a beautiful woman! Upon my word of honor! Fuck it!"

And when he served at the military orchestra, their leader usually walked the city with a tube, which is the biggest trumpet in brass bands. Just donned it and went out hunting for "trash", such a shifty schemer was he, I swear.

He was walking and looking out where they carried funeral wreaths for him to follow. "Would you like a military band at the funeral? Let's talk terms." I swear by my Mom, some foxy wheeler-dealer, but "playing trash" not with the whole orchestra, sure thing. Such kind of "trash" was called "to play a sleeper". Yes.

Now, one time, as usual, we went "to play a sleeper". On the second floor, the door to the landing wide open, all’s socko, good and proper, we marched in.

In the first room, the relatives sitting by the walls, a-crying all, good and proper, as befit the occasion. Only that they were somehow way too much at it, and paying zero attention that the musicians had arrived. So, the leader came up to the one he had made the deal with, "What's the fuss?"

"Oh, we're so distressed! It's a disaster. We may have to cancel the funeral." And she showed us to the next room, also packed with relatives a-crying, but even louder than in the first room.

Now, in the room center, there stood a table with a coffin on it, all’s socko, good and proper. And in the coffin, the dead man a-sitting. Well, upon my word, real sitting, bolt upright.

See, when alive, he was a hunchback and because of so big a hump, they couldn't make him lie down as required. Whoops, that’s how our "playing a sleeper" got fucked…

But the leader was a fucking tough character, he came nearer and pressed at the sleeper's forehead; it went over its hump and lay down in a proper way. Only after the correction its legs stuck up in the air, no way to shut the coffin lid.

"We've already tried that way!" sez she who the deal was made with, and wails loudest in the room.

And ain't I tell you the leader was a real sport, eh? I swear, some socko, good and proper fucker. "Okay," says he. "I wanna all but the musicians out of the room."

Well, in general, we pulled the sleeper out of the coffin, placed it on the floor, face down, hoisted the coffin over it and – bang! Who would fucking like to lose a "trash", eh?

("It.. helped?" asks I thru tears.)

Well, something cracked, but—I swear by my Mom!—it did straighten out. We put the coffin back upon the table and shoved the body straight in. All in a socko proper way. It's only that...

("??" I no longer have any strength for asking.)

Well, the sleeper grew ten centimeters taller now and the feet stuck out from the too-short coffin. Fuck!

In the tall tale of the *lahbooh* about the hunchback "sleeper" reality mingled with fiction... Sprawled over a plywood seat in the cinema hall, I was expiring with laughter, having no idea that in the Stavropol city there was the Regional Committee of the CPSU headed by its Secretary, a certain Gorbachov, the future mortician of the USSR handled Hunchy, yet among the Stavropol "workshoppers" of that period they referred to him as Envelope.

> (..."workshoppers" were the people aspiring to do business under the realities of developed socialism, and they had to pay for their dreams to come true.
>
> Gorbachov trained the Stavropol workshoppers to bring their payment to him exclusively in envelopes, good and proper, as it was practiced in all the civilized world...)

~ ~ ~

I don't want you to form a rash notion as if the construction battalion was a dreary desperate hard labor and nothing else. Sometimes even there came the spring, and we switched over to the summer outfit.

We handed our long-sleeved undershirts and pea-jackets to the company Master Sergeant, because the winter uniform had, for some reason, become way too heavy. We changed warm gray hats of artificial fur for dandyish piss-cutters.

It's real nice to stand in the light-dressed ranks at the Morning Dispensing under a freshly blue sky with great sailings of thin transparent feather clouds in the fathomless height, and in the luster of the morning sun ride in the open bed of a truck into the city with so many bright skirts and frocks walking its sidewalks... In spring, the population of girls grew drastically, and they began to spill over and out of the sidewalks.

In any case, at the end of a working day, two girls appeared even in the territory of the would-be Medical Center... I was nearing the place where the truck usually picked us up, and those two girls walked in the same direction some 30 meters ahead of me. Probably, they were taking a shortcut somewhere and leisurely paced ahead, talking to each other.

Suddenly, their chatter broke off. Bypassing the truck arrival point, they accelerated to quick strides and disappeared from the view... And at the spot, there was already sitting Sasha Khvorostyuk – the first to pop up.

Seated on a half-meter stump, he kept his knees wide apart resting his hands on them, like, in the KGC—King of Gay Cocks—posture and, happy with himself, kept turning royally his beak from side to side. From his unbuttoned fly, his cock was drooping languidly... That's why the girls trotted away, and hardly would they shortcut here anymore. Because of that fucked in the head platypus!.

And sometimes in the construction battalion, you might quite unexpectedly get into another world – away from all those trenches, shovels, pallets, humiliations... That Sunday morning everything went on as always, yet on entering the city our truck changed tack.

Probably, our Lance-Corporal Alik Aliyev knew where we were going, but his vocabulary limitations did not allow him to talk of anything beyond the usual commands and responses, so he kept enigmatic and puffed up mien. The truck pulled up by the city circus building. We jumped off after Alik and were met by a man in the civilian who explained what we had to do. There was a change in the circus – one troupe was leaving and replaced with the touring circus of Lilliputians.

> (..what is the role of the construction battalion in the interval between two circuses?
>
> Exactly! To load one and unload the other...)

But still it was a holiday, and we festively dragged large boxes into long trailers with canvas tops, and festively pulled boxes looking quite the same out from looking the same, but already other, long freight trailers. And then we ate ice-cream, drank kvass from the wheeled barrel in the circus square, entered the building and got seated wherever one chose, on the velvet crimson seats in the empty amphitheater around the arena.

The artists from the newly arrived Lilliputians troupe walked admired circles around the shortest serviceman in our special-mission loader-group.

Were he wise enough to grow two centimeters shorter, they would not press him in the army, not even to a construction battalion, but now: Taller than a meter and fifty-six? Wow! A ready-made non-combatant!

One of the Lilliputians even spoke to him in an undertone—the soldier never confessed what about. Most likely, it was an invitation to enter the number of power acrobats, when the whole pyramid of light-weight Lilliputians was built upon the propping shoulders of the midget strongman…

One of the Lilliputian women invited me to follow her. We left the building thru a side passage and she led me to a row of house trailers.

> (...it's somehow strange to follow a woman not taller than your waist, feels kinda being an elephant in a small Indian village...)

She climbed onto the high porch way, shot her arm up, high above her head, and pulled at the unyielding door handle. Plaintively asked she for assistance. I lowered my hand on the handle which readily turned down, and pulled the door.

"Thank you!" said the voice of the highest-pitched flute.

"You're welcome."

It's so inconvenient to live in a world not made to match you…

I returned to the circus where Alik Aliyev trotted enraptured circles in the arena chasing the white pony who openly resented flirtations from any stray Lance-Corporals in *kirza* high boots.

In the pit above the curtained arena entrance, the brass band hurriedly rehearsed bravura marches with the slight streak of impudent outa-keyness innate in circus orchestras.

A group of Lilliputians gathered by the heavy folds of the arena entrance curtains, following as one of them, the size of a kindergarten kid, was giving hell to her husband whom she had caught pants down in a trailer with another Lilliputian woman. When fired out in sparrow squeaks, foul language loses its specific weightiness, but the intensity of the infuriated wife's emotions was on a par with the deepest Shakespearean passions…

Olga arrived in the middle of the day. We were brought to the midday meal and they told me, "Your wife waits in the checkpoint guardhouse."

I raced there, then to the Staff barrack, they gave me the Leave Ticket only until next morning. Battalion Commander was not there, said they, the Ticket would be prolonged the following day after the Morning Dispensing, they said. Then I barely found some parade-crap, the Master Sergeant was not there together with the wareroom key. But in a canvas outfit, the military patrols in the city would rake you in at once, be there even dozens Leave Tickets on you.

So we got to the city only in the evening, but she had already had a room in the hotel: a one-person suite with a washbasin on the wall.

Then some red-haired guy knocked at the door. Olga introduced him, meet please, we arrived by the same train together. The fellow-traveler invited us to his room, where he had a party with his friends. We went over and on the way, Olga asked me to pretend that she was my sister – when on the train she jazzed him that she was visiting her brother.

(...well, okay, then...

Sarah and Abraham had also been there...)

He had a long table in his room all filled with wine bottles, sort of a hussar banquet. Sometime earlier, he was a cadet at the Stavropol Military Aviation School but got expelled and now came there to see his friends, and all those already were third-year cadets...

I knew their Aviation School, out squad-team once were laying partitions in the basement of some building there. When the bell sounded and the cadets rushed to the classes from the yard, we combed trash pits in the gazebos hunting cigarette stubs… Now they were sharing common memories with each other, toasting this and that from their mutual past.

We also drank. And then I saw how that kicked-out cadet dropped his palm on Olga's knee. What to do? To surprise him with a bottle crushed against his pate? Not quite traditional treatment of your prospective brother-in-law though.

Of course, she took his hand off and I, like, didn't see anything. Soon we left and back in our room she said, “Well, and so what of it?”

Indeed, on Peace Square in Konotop when our whole passe alighted on a bench by the constantly dry fountain for a smoke, they also stroked her knees and she as casually brushed their stray hands off. Yet, we weren't married then…

In the morning, when I ran to the UAZ van taking Ensigns to the detachment, Jafarov rocked with laughter in its open bed.

"You ran as if in a slow-motion film stretch. Clearly doing your best, but still no progress. I swear by Mommy. Good luck there was no counter wind."

They gave me the Leave Ticket only till the evening roll-call, dirty fuckers. When I returned, Olga was still sleeping, in her blouse inside out.

Then it was the time to check out, the room was for one day only. I told her I should be back at the Battalion for the evening roll-call, and she said her train was also in the evening.

We went to the cinema, some kind of a fairy tale about a Persian Hercules named Rostam... Then we were sitting on a bench at the foot of the Komsomol Gorka Hill.

She said that she had to go to the station, but no need to see her off, and she started to cry. The rare passers-by scoffed on the sly – a classical picture by Repin: the girl got pregnant but the soldier doesn't care a fuck.

When she left, I sat on a little more and then went home…

The next day in the Canteen, I knock-toppled a bowl of soup from the table. It spilled in my lap, scolding even thru the canvas pants. I could not get it at all how it happened. Everyone at the table looked up at me, oddly silent, and no one laughed.

Spilled the soup in the lap...What sign could it be? The blouse inside-out. Why?.

> (...it's better not to think some thoughts, just leave them alone and if heedlessly started they'd better be dropped and not thought down the road to their inevitable conclusions...)

~ ~ ~

Zampolit ordered the Club Director, Alexander Roodko, there should be a brass band by the Victory Day, on May 9, or he'd get the boot and busted to a construction site as a plasterer's hand, and his Company Master Sergeant would rot him "on the floors" until his demobilization day.

Of course, we pulled for The Orion leader and did not let him down, in mere three weeks a brass band was thrown together. Jafarov and Commissar, clear enough, were two horn players, Pickle played the baritone, and Zameshkevich blew the tuba. As it turned out, in their schooldays, they participated in a brass music course. Karpesha was the drummer, Roodko played the clarinet, the Club painter dubbed the big drum and mine was the main instrument in any brass band – two copper plates. Bzdents!!.

Sasha Lopatko began his service in the same squad-team with me, but then his Dad came and held negotiations in the Staff barrack and Sasha was appointed the Club painter... His Dad was, by the by, a priest and, probably, for that reason Sasha got to the construction battalion. You can't trust whosoever handling advanced weaponry, right?.

We rehearsed 2 numbers: "On the Hills of Manchuria" and "Farewell of the Slav Woman", not because we got way too scared by Zampolit's threat but simply a *lahbooh* would do whatever is humanly possible to help out another *lahbooh*.

On May 9, we changed into parade-craps and were taken by the UAZ van to different construction sites escorted by the "goat"-Willys carrying Zampolit. Holidays were invented for idlers and the construction battalion warriors are always on duty. The squad-teams at the sites visited by those 2 vehicles got ordered to briefly leave their front of work and fall in by their projects. Zampolit pushed over a very short speech (the Battalion Commander with his leaky brain would start an oration for a half-hour without knowing what he was about at all), we played

"The Slav" and "The Hills" and the sun shimmered playfully from our brass and copper... To have a holiday you do need a brass band…

Next step in The Orion's career became the one-night dances in the village club of Demino, in 6 kilometers from our detachment along the same asphalt road. In response to the kind invitation, the musicians not only played but, replacing each other at the instruments, climbed, in turn, down from the small stage to the small hall to dance midst the local youth. Of all The Orions the pleasure was withheld only for Alexander Roodko, the irreplaceable bassist.

Under the long-long song sung by Robert Zakarian, I was embracing the ample-bodied villager Irina. Life was smiling on me…

Before his demobilization, Yura Zameshkevich reported to Major Avetissian, the Battalion Supply and Maintenance Commander, that no one but I was qualified to replace him at the position of the Battalion Stoker. Zameshkevich's statement was actively backed by a Battalion Cook Vladimir Rassolov, aka Pickle, who had still another half-year to serve. In course of petitioning, the chef congratulated the Supply and Maintenance Commander on obtaining the long-awaited-for rank of Major. As a result, Major Avetissian granted my enrollment to the glorious ranks of *chmo*.

The collective name of *chmo* embraced all the servicemen engaged in the battalion internal services: the pigman, dishwashers, stokers, cooks, the locksmith, the tailor, the shoemaker, the projectionist, the drivers of the vehicles for the commanding officers, as well as the assistant paramedic at the first aid unit – anyone, in short, who was not fortunate enough to work at construction sites was referred to as a part of *chmo* reporting to Major Avetissian.

> (...initially, CHMO was the acronym of "person messing around with the society" but soon because of its so impressive sound form the term forced to forget the original meaning and nowadays everyone thinks that *chmo* is a synonym to "wafler" only more degrading...)

Before his return to civilian life, Yura Zameshkevich showed me the location of the water well with the main water supply valve-wheels to keep the proper water level in the tank above the stoker-house. He taught me to light the nozzle in the steam boiler furnace with a handmade torch, to read the steam-gauge, water-reserve tube and pressure manometer. I was transferred to Fourth Company where all the *chmo* was listed, and Yura got demobilized.

The young draft was from the Crimea and Major Avetissian chose me a partner from them named Vanya who sported a thin mustache and thick eyebrows. It's highly doubtful that Major Avetissian's choice of Vanya was prompted by the eyebrows' thickness of the latter. Most likely, Vanya's father, who came to see his offspring on the third day of sonny’s service, forwarded convincing arguments in his negotiations with Major. I shared Yura Zameshkevich's lectures to Vanya and we split 7/24 into day-in, day-out.

The stoker-house of the Military Detachment 41769, aka VSO-11, consisted of two high halls in a red-brick one-story building. Each of the halls contained 2 massive boilers encased in their

common lining of refractive brick, and a slew of pipes with valves and cocks – for hot water, for cold water, for steam, for fuel supply... On the concrete floor before each boiler, there was planted an air pump forcing the fuel to spray thru the nozzle inside the respective furnace. However, in operation was only one boiler, the farthermost from the entrance, the rest were reserved for the heating season in winter.

The stokers' task in summertime was providing steam for boilers in the kitchen of the Canteen plus hot water for the Dishwashers'. And, once a month, we heated water for the bath day of all the personnel at VSO-11 and Separate Company. Anyway, each day you had to sit at a round table by the high window opposite the deafening rumble of the air blower and the howling buzz of the nozzled flame inside the boiler's furnace for about 4 hours until the on-duty cook knocked on the locked door of the stoker-house to say the *havvage* got ready. Then you could turn it off. The runs for breakfast and supper were shorter though. Silence is an invaluable grace… Until the next, one of the remaining 2, shorter, 2-hour stretch.

To the right from the entrance door, there was a narrow room of the pumping section to drive hot water thru the heating system in winter. But if going straight ahead, in the corner behind the twinned boilers of the first hall, you found the door to a small workshop. It had a window, a wooden workbench without a vice put by the butt wall across the room, an iron box in the corner between the door and the window, a hammer and a blunt chisel in that unlocked safe-like box, and a narrow mirror shard embedded in the plaster above the box, next to the switch for the bulb in the ceiling.

~ ~ ~

The arrival of summer was celebrated by the *chmo* of VSO-11 by a collective booze. The battalion's truck delivering *havvage* to the watchmen at the construction sites and those kept there even at night by urgent works came back with a box of vodka smuggled utilizing a huge thermos pot emptied of *havvage*. The on-duty officer at the checkpoint cast a fleeting glance into the bed of the returning truck, and it passed the gate.

The orgy, to which I also was invited because a stoker is a necessary accessory in the soldiery life, started after the lights-out near the remote car-boxes. In the bright illumination from the full moon, some fifteen *chmo*men sat on the ground in a wide circle, kinda aboriginal tribe of that field. Everyone faced the center of the circle where the glass of vodka bottles, and the sides of two pots full of meat fried by cooks in large baking trays at the Canteen kitchen, glistened in the moonlight. On the spread burlap of two empty sacks there piled several loaves of bread chopped in the Bread-Cutter's. Never before I had vodka from the bottle's neck. The initial gulps were somewhat disgusting but the following kept pouring in smoothly.

The snack, regrettably, disappeared all too soon... I never finished the bottle in my hand. Having risen on unsteady legs, with the most best wishes to the honest company, I informed of the immediate departure of me to the village of Demino.

"All's *nyshtyak*, buddy-bros. What fucki' on-dut' what fucki' office..rr... It's me on-dut'.... fuck!.."

Nevertheless, so as not to run into, I crossed the perimeter fence near the pigsty, away from the barracks. And there I made for the round face of the full moon that shone from above the distant village of Demino and was swaying back and forth like on a swing. I muttered reproaches to its treacherous inconstancy, and to the field as well for arranging a sea-rolling in my way. Then I fell down and tried to hoist me on my elbows but the earth gravity occurred too powerful and the field was so irresistibly soft…

I woke up in the dusk of dawn, only a hundred meters from the pigsty, dying from thirst, and went back to drink water from the tap in the stoker-house before crashing onto the workbench in the workshop room...

Looked like I'd given too free rein to my wishful thinking, imagining that till the end of service I would live my life between the Club and the stoker-house. On some morning after a night shift, Major Avetissian found me asleep in the workshop and ordered to retreat to the Company barrack. And that at the time when the majority of *chmo*men skipped even mustering the roll-calls before lights-out! Thus, the soldier-clerk from the Stuff half-barrack slept at the Medical Unit hosted by the paramedic assistant sharing a bed from the couple of normal ones waiting for ill personnel whom he escorted to the city military hospital the moment they popped up with health complains. The Club painter Lopatko had a room of his own at the Club. But the ill-fated stoker, after sitting all day in that howling hell of the stoker-house, had to go for the evening roll-call where instead of absent *chmo*men a voice from the ranks would shout out "on duty!" and there were no questions at all…

To somehow pass the time while they were cooking *havvage*, I took a book from the library in the Staff barrack, with the assistance of the Staff clerk. The book was chosen because of its thickness so that it lasted longer. *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky. Wow! That's the stuff! A culmination upon culmination... After those of his works prescribed by the school curriculum, I wouldn't ever think he was writing so cool... And there wasn't anything else to take from the Staff library with its just one shelf of books, because reading the masterpieces of B. Polevoy or N. Ostrovsky was not worth the while after the Dostoevsky's novel.

At the Club, Roodko passed me a booklet *The Beatles in America* about their tour there. Some of the *youngs* brought it along. I undertook to translate it because that booklet had more pictures than the text. However, without a dictionary at hand, my school stock of vocabulary allowed me to understand it only here, there, yet not everywhere. I filled the gaps with my wild guesses, but Roodko was happy all the same...

And so it went in a circle – the hiss of steam, the rumble of the air pump, the Club, the evening roll-call, and back to the Club. And in the morning all over again...

Here, Jafarov rushes a-galloping into the stoker-house with his eyes round and bulging, the face as pale as the white marks on his khaki shirt back which he had fucking rubbed against some whitewashed wall.

"Where to hide? Chief of Staff's after me!"

I watched out the door and who was there but him – making for the stoker-house from the Canteen's kitchen in his boxer swagger. Jafarov barely had time to jump out thru the window in the workshop into the tall grass on the other side of the stoker-house. "No, Comrade Major, no one was coming this way."

But the Major's scent would surpass that of a hunting dog, and in a moment, from behind the corner, "Ensign Jafarov! To me!"

Fucking caput to you, Ensign, I swear by your Mommy... Why should Chief of Staff chase Jafar as with a fucking prick in his arse? But then, who fucking cares...

And in the evening there's another hunt in the field. The swarthy cowboys from Separate Company ran down a rat and drove it into a stub of plugged pipe there, splashed gasoline inside and set on fire. The rat whizzed out and jumped around the field like a ball of flames and they followed running – some cultural and sports event...

When it was my night shift, I came across a brood of rats in the passage around the twinned boilers. I hollered and rushed to trample them, but they fled. And then I wondered where that sudden rat-hate had cropped up in me from?. The pure instinct of self-preservation that's what it was. Rats would not forgive the humans, including me as well, the death in flames of that rat martyr, so to forestall their avenge I attacked first. Fucking moron…

One night I was sleeping on the workbench when some strange thing lit on my chest. Something dark like a clot of black fog, sort of, and it pressed to strangle me. I wanted to brush it off but had no strength even to stir or at least scream it away as if all of my strength had dried up leaving me pitifully paralyzed. It took a desperate effort to wake up.

Later Vanya, putting on a look of an expert, began to lecture me it was a bogey. They're just fucking stupid in that Crimea of theirs. Bogeys live at folks' homes, right? The stoker-house is anything but a home. Where could a bogey pop up here from, eh?.

What I omitted to tell Vanya was that the creature sat exactly in that place on my chest which I had shaved by the safety razor in front of the mirror piece embedded in the wall plaster. Well, to get a macho look, of course, because what I had there was like that down on Vanya's upper lip. But it fucking did not work and the chest remained unchanged, smooth and bare…

After the evening roll-call, I went to Demino and there I found the house of Irina whom I met when we played dances at their club. There was also her elder sister in the house. Irina left the kitchen for a while and her sister started a solo Sing-a-song about how Irina was only nineteen-year-old and had never come across a low-grade buster in her life as of yet and would I mind her taking a look at my military ID, by the way. That was her way to hint, sort of, about her sister's being a virgin.

"No worry, I'm not a buster."

The soldier’s military ID, as stipulated in the Statute of the Internal Military Service, each serviceman had always to have by him, and so was mine in my jacket inner pocket. There was a slight problem though boiling down to just one line at the bottom of its first page: 'wife – Olga Abramovna Ogoltsova". Because of that record, I had to drive a fool to that smart-Alec of a guardian-sister about conbatists' IDs being locked up in a big iron safe at the Battalion Staff and given out to us together with the Leave Ticket which papers we had to hand in on coming back from the city and, going on AWOL to their village, I skipped disturbing Battalion Commander with a request for my military ID.

Then there popped up the husband of the elder of the two sisters, named Senya who at first, like, started to be jealous, sort of, but then all of us drank tea in peace and I left...

A week later, a soldier from Separate Company appeared in the stoker-house. There's a girl, he said, at the corner of the wall fence, who asked for me. I went there, it was Irina... Demino folks sometimes went from Stavropol to their village along the asphalt road on foot, in twos or threes, but she was alone... Hello. Hey. Kisses... We agreed that after the evening roll-call I come to the village.

"Will you walk with me a little?"

That meant along the whole wall, past the Staff barrack, past the checkpoint. "No, I'll wait for you near that corner."

I walked along the paths inside the battalion, parallel to the asphalt road outside. And from that far off corner, I even walked with her a bit.

> (...now I am sorry for missing that opportunity. After all, how beautifully we might have passed together along the whole construction battalion. Leisurely, absorbed in each other, seeing nothing of the drab world around. And if the on-duty Ensign suddenly stopped me at the checkpoint I might just tell him to...
>
> Although, who cares what exactly might have been told if I missed it and cowardly walked inside like a worthless boob...)

At night she took her clothes off down to the panties, which she abstained to remove and actively defended. The item of discord was rather capacious and stretching willingly, maybe after all those who, like me, aspired yet failed to become the buster.

In the morning, after the night spent in monotonous useless efforts at peeling those panties off her, I left the girl in her staunch irremovables and went back, without any tea at that time.

6 kilometers along an asphalt road with the nature awakening around for a new day – it's a rare treat. The light was flowing all over the sky, but the sun hadn't yet hove into sight. On a roadside hillock, I saw a horse among the greens of broad-leaved grass and, without giving it a moment's thought, turned towards him... Pure idiocy. I had never ridden a horse in my life, but I suddenly felt like it.

The horse started to retreat, and I ran after him but did not catch up, and only drenched my canvas pants with the thick dew covering the grass.

I returned to the road and walked on yelling all sorts of songs – nobody was near to hear my crap.

"Sleep! The night of June is just six-hour looooooooong!"

In a week I received her letter sent from Stavropol, "...my soul aches – for whom? – for you!..." So beautiful words were wasted because I had already been harpooned and trophied by the one who "...was devastatingly happy..."

> (...I never answered the letter but I do hope that Irina had eventually found a proper buster and they started living a happy, wealthy, and blissful life thereafter...)

~ ~ ~

After one year of service in the armed forces of the USSR, a soldier was eligible for a 10-day furlough to visit his home, the place where he was drafted from. When I spoke of my right to Major Avetissian, he did not even want to listen. How could Vanya possibly withstand ten days working round the clock alone?

Vanya said that, yes, he was up to the task, and Major Avetissian promised to give me a 10-day leave if I do a cosmetic overhaul in the stoker-house, to wit, whitewashing its interior.

The VSO-11 locksmith, private Ter-Terian, showed me the spot in the tall grass where they buried the lime not utilized at the previous cosmetology efforts. I loaded it in portions in a bath basin with handle-ears, added water to the proportion, hoisted it upon the furnaces to reach the ceiling in the stoker-house and with a broad brush – ...slip-slop... slop-slup... – whitewashed where I could reach.

Then I took a long iron ladder from the locksmith Ter-Terian and leaned it against the walls, at some places against the pipes run under the ceiling, and – ....slip-slop.... slop-slup.... – went on because it's just a circus and nothing else – ....slip-slop.... slop-slup.... – but on the other hand, does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?

However, no Tom Sawyer would stand a whole week of circus-like whitewashing – two hugely tall and wide halls plus two enormous furnaces with a pair of twinned boilers within each.

Heated anticipation – that's what helped me to hold out that week... After all, Olga and I – ...slip-slop...– missed trying so many things yet – ...slip-slip-slop!..– we'll do it that way and even so and then all over again in full juxtaposition–...slop!...slop!..slop-slup!..– ten furlough nights that would fucking shatter the fucking world –...slip-slip-slop!...SLOOOP-slup!.

And now the renovation's over. The concrete floor in both halls bears variously shaped white splotches, even though I've swept it. The pipes under the ceiling got hastily wiped up. The

whitewashing if not too uniform but then universal – without left-out spots. All in all, two huge halls and two gigantic furnaces.

"Comrade Major, the overhaul is done."

"And you call this an overhaul?"

"Comrade Major, you have promised..."

“I promised nothing!"

That's how Major Avetissian had fucked Tom Sawyer... SLIP-SLOP!!

At the end of the day, Gray came to the stoker-house, "Got the fuck?"

"Yea."

In the construction battalion, everyone knows everything about anyone else.

"Fuck him. Now we'll have a flight to Paris."

From the inner pocket of his jacket, he takes out a folded newspaper page, opens it at the place marked by a brownish thin plate, breaks a pinch of it off then folds and hides the paper back. The pinch gets crumbled into a tiny pile in his palm over which he presses and rolls a "Belomor-Canal" cigarette in between his fingers until two-thirds of the tobacco pours into his palm. A sharp blow into the Belomor’s thick-paper mouthpiece scatters the rest of the tobacco away. He bites the edge of the paper tube and pulls the cigarette tissue halfway off the mouthpiece. The stuff and tobacco in the palm mixed with care, the lengthened cigarette tube starts to consume the mixture in gentle tiny jerks.

Though watching the process for the first time ever, I still knew he was stuffing a joint.

"Spark it," and he brought up a burning match. "Keep the smoke in you.”

We smoked the joint passing it to each other, I diligently copied his way of inhaling and keeping the smoke in the lungs.

"Well, so what?"

"What what?"

"You asking? Wasn't you fucking touched? Well, you're some moose!"

"I'm sorry."

Disappointed, he left for the evening roll-call…

~ ~ ~

One week later, on my day shift, 2 soldiers of a Central Asian appearance modestly entered the stoker-house filled with the duet wailing by the furnace and the pump. Probably, from Separate Company, or else ours from the Crimean draft.

"We a-need sieve it," one of them said timidly.

"What?"

"Da ganja. You knows yoursel."

I did not really understand what all that was about, yet it's not proper to look ignorant before the *youngs*. "Okay."

They came out and returned 4 already, carrying a couple of some gunnysack bags. I led them to the workshop room and returned to watch the howlers.

A couple of times, I checked into the workshop with the grass bunches spread out on the workbench. They greeted me with their mute united smiles of gratitude and I went back – why to interfere with busy people knowing their job? In two hours, when it was already quiet in the stoker-house, their caravan moved to the exit. "We there a-left," said the last in their file with a joyful smile.

In a shallow plywood box that had since long been kicking back around on the workbench, there was a handful of brownish sticky dust. I put it away into the iron box next to the never used hammer-and-chisel and just forgot about it...

Of course, I remembered the dust in the box when on the payday instead of the usual "Prima" I bought a pack of "Belomor-Canal". Repeating the procedure demonstrated by Gray, I stuffed a blunt and sparked.

Vo-ohoo! What the tha-a-at?

And I swam up to the mirror peeping from the wall and looked into to make sure there really was no one behind because there was a clear feeling as if my head was like a balloon that was not filled too tight so you could jab it from opposite sides but not as deep as to burst up but just to spin your fingers inside where they do not reach each other as I was now feeling jabbed thru my temples and they twirled inside the brain convolutions but in the mirror there was just only me alone without anyone behind me the balloon floating gentle and slow because I was kinda zeppelin but then yes it was only very necessary to fly over and check the manometer glass or else we all will fly away and very high... you are the moose yoursel, Gray...

(...that was how I became a *nashavan*, aka grass doper, one of the enlightened initiates who get kef from cannabis, aka marijuana, aka grass, aka anasha, aka ganja, aka kif...etc...)

The first one to register my acquisition of the new dimension was Gueerok, a descendant of German colonists, one of the Ensigns at Fourth Company. He saw me stunned still, in a stoned reading from the scraps of *The Red Star,* the army daily glued, a decade before, on the tin stand in the grass drying up by the drill grounds.

The sun kept pouring its scorching heat on my piss-cutter. So what? Like to the political studies, like, I'm preparing… Hmm… Americans once again defeated in Vietnam, from our correspondent in Saigon… He approached me from the right but seeing that the "Belomor-Canal" cigarette in my fingers was smoked up to its paper mouthpiece and there was no hope even for the “heel”-stub, he smiled a weary smile, licked his dry lips, and weakly melted away in the heat…

The veil of ignorance slipped off from my enlightened eyes and there came the revelation that everyone in The Orion was on the drag, though each one in his own way... Karpesha and Pickle in a businesslike manner. Jafarov – very softly. Roodko was following the homeopathic shebang of moderate buoys at regular intervals. Robert – when they treated him, yet not always... It looked like I almost got late for a departing train.

But the coolest weed was by Sasha Lopatko, the Club painter. In his room, I had half-weightlessness fits, moving gracefully as some underwater vegetation or, when in full, like on a visit to the orbital space station Salyut, only not often, because of his meanness. Roodko also agreed that he had never seen such a greedy egoist in his life. And strange it seemed indeed when taking into account such a good father – a minister of the cult, who should infuse his son with love towards your neighbor...

(...when on high, your drift can be sort of different to another time of being under. In kef, generally, you’re getting filled with all-forgiving calm, you feel mellow and nappy, and you want any other mother’s son feel good too and you get so discreet and unobtrusive, you don't want to disturb anyone's fluff.

Or you could suddenly notice some funny wrinkle in the surrounding reality and – you're done, you just cannot stop, you'll laugh until completely exhausted, then you'll catch your breath and start laughing again. That kind of drift is called "to catch the arrival". That’s the most dangerous drift if you’re a TV announcer.

Still another time, you could get concentrated on doing something and went on doing it, and doing it, and doing in the mode of utter circumspection and methodicality with the utmost, ofttimes unnecessary, finesse and over-perseverance, and though it’s so fucking long ago that you should’ve drop it, you'll still keep doing it and doing... Like that team of *zeks* who felled an Oak coppice equipped with only a couple of jigsaws.

Or, let’s take, the so-called "piggy" drift; this is when you got started eating something and all of a sudden there unfolds such a gamma of taste sensations that you, without ever noticing it, could put away a whole pot of cold macaroni from the day before yesterday and scrape the bottom.

And, on the whole, you became ever so prudent, awesomely perspicuous, and when some buddy’s coming up to you, like, "Hi, how's your nothing?" you knew already at which point of his nonprofit socializing he’d start chiseling for a pinch for a joint.

Or there may get started to form all kinds of deep thoughts by you—fucking Isaac Newton!—only that they did not linger for long so as to shape them clearly and got lost because of one thing or another distracted you over to something else equally profound. All in all, a play of shadows on the swirling whiffs of fog.

Listening to music when you ride the wave is the utmost drift...)

In the musicians’ we had a record player on the bookshelf together with the one and only LP disc, "Burn" by The Deep Purple... Getting seated on the floor next to a speaker, I would hold the disc cover in my hands and consider it unswervingly till all of the side played to the end – there were their busts, like, in bronze, with a tongue of flame from each one's head, like, a lighter, sort of, the dudes were clearly understanding what's what in blasting…

A real bummer popped up when *anasha* suddenly ran out and, no matter whomever you rolled up, no one had it; such a period was named "the empty suction". Everyone became dog snappy, some buddies even got crashed because of the fucking *khoomar* was so too pressing. No kidding, they became just fragments a-jitter; some simply eyesore sight…

Once Gray heated me with pills that he brought from the city.

"Would ye?"

"What's that?"

"*Nyshtyak*."

"Okay".

He was passing them, one by one, for me to swallow. With half of the pack over, I said, "And what's the dose?"

"All's *nyshtyak*."

So I consumed the whole pack. Then a roar flooded the ears, as from a waterfall, and the night got dense and dark around.

Oh... the stoker-house… Vanya's shift... I entered.

He talked to me but I couldn't get it at all. Then I began to walk around the furnace, what for?. He told me later that at one point I stopped in the dark passage behind the boiler, and stood there for half-hour as a monument, like, in bronze. And, most importantly, I was afraid of going to bed: what if getting somehow asleep I wouldn't wake up? But eventually, I came to myself.

And Gray was just a bitchy scumbag not knowing the dose himself, kinda experimenting on people whether I'd survive or not.

"But you're some fucking moose!."

Vanya's wife came on a visit from their Crimea village... The construction battalion started to seem some club of married dolts because of whose premature marriages I again was pulling at the stoker-house one shift after another.

When she left, Vanya changed from the parade-crap into his fatigues and came to the stoker-house as gloomy as the sadness itself. I didn't want to barge in the buddy's meditations and the darkness outside the windows was as delicate as me...

And then Roodko, the Club Director, arrived in the stoker-house. He had the regular cold in his snoot and, in the medical unit, they forked him out some powder for inhalation. So, grabbing on the way a tin cup from the Dishwashers', he navigated to the stoker-house in another of his futile attempts at curbing his adenoidal condition.

The powder from the folded sheet of paper was poured into the cup, then he added boiling water from the boiler tap and covered the cup with a stray piece of cardboard, sort of a lid to keep the mixture hot and not let it cool down right away.

That way he and I sat by the round table talking our talks. And, while talking, Roodko would move that cardboard lid, sniff at the cup a time or two, cover it back and we would go on with our gossip.

Now, by that particular moment in the course of his army service, Vanya had already seen different sights in the stoker-house and, standing in the dark of the adjacent hall of it, he followed all those collateral manipulations and came to certain aberrant conclusions. In determined strides, neared he the round table and, "Roodko! Gimme too!"

"What to give?"

"Well, this!" And Vanya pointed at the Roodko's contraption.

Roodko was as naive as any other intellectual and he thought if he had a running nose then whosoever could have it also. "Welcome."

Vanya pulled the cardboard off, took a couple of sniffs, deep indeed, filling himself to the heels, and I saw how his eyes rolled under his forehead getting more and more, however strange it may sound, crosswise on the way.

So what? I, personally, would believe it. Self-hypnosis is a great power because faith moves the mountains. If Vanya believed that Roodko was consuming the fucking "blue fairy" by bucketfuls there, then any other moment he could fall into hallucinatory strawberry fields and fucking easily too, I swear. Someone had to save the buddy.

"Vanya," says I, "the other day in the Canteen I talked to a Tatar from your draft."

"And what?"

"Well, nothing special...just that I says there, 'hey buddy, what's your name?', and he says, ‘Me a-Russian no understand'...to which, 'Okay,' says I, 'a fully clear matter, but how much do you have to serve yet?'...and here he at once clutches his head from both sides, 'Vooy! Fucking too much!' says he... So, Vanya, could he was a friend of yours?"

In short, I did have pumped the partner back from his hallucinations because that's the law of soldiery friendship – help your comrade out even by the cost of your own life…

~ ~ ~

> (...in my opinion, The Orion provided their musical services free of charge, that is for nothing. In any case, I do not remember any talks about any money for "playing trash".
>
> For us, musicians in The Orion, just breaking out from the bounds of the Military Detachment 41769, playing dances for people dressed in civilian clothes was an invaluable payment in itself. So, if you like, we were paid by minutes of freedom, time is money sometimes.
>
> Was there any dough sticking to a palm at the commanding level? Say, to that of Zampolit of our battalion? I have no idea and don’t feel like lying...)

With the draft from Simferopol, there arrived one more musician to join The Orion. Yura Nikolayev knew his worth because his price-list he studied well before the army, playing the rhythm guitar in a restaurant band.

And he also sang (without particular voice range and particular crap) within the framework of usual orders from restaurant revelers, heated with a couple of decanters of vodka.

> ***"Here's water, it is good and cool!***
>
> ***Adding it to vodka is the gentlemanly rule!"***

After the third decanter, it was time for hard rock:

> ***"....by softly murmuring waters of the Nile,***

Free of care, of pains, of nasty neighbors,

There lived a small but happy crocodile!.."

And when the client grew fully ripe, the surrealistic splashes gushed forth:

"The firewood bloomed and horses were a-twitting,

A camel came from Africa on skates…

Chorus:

No, no no need to giddy-up me, sweetie,

I'm daft enough as is–

Aye! Aye! Aye!. "

So my presence in The Orion was justified by merely a couple of old numbers but the Ensign, appointed to supervise us at playing out of the battalion, could not inform Zampolit that I was going with the ensemble for no good reason. And not only I was getting something for nothing – 2 or 3 *chmo*men usually went along under the pretext of being sound engineers.

However, playing dances was a seasonal affair. The New Year parties were the main vent for The Orion getting outside the VSO-11. It's only once that we were engaged in summer, or rather at the beginning of autumn. That was playing dances at a bakery plant. Whether it was the same one where my team-squad had been collecting alms from the production line conveyors, I couldn't tell. Arriving in for that party, I saw only the asphalted courtyard enclosed by the row of locked truck boxes and the three-story building of the Plant Management with the party buzzing on its second floor.

Of course, I danced there quite a lot, and one of my partners got so charmed that she didn't hesitate to go out of the hall, at my suggestion. We climbed the dark staircase to the third floor but the landing there with the locked door to a corridor was occupied by them those *chmo* sound engineers drinking wine.

On the first floor, the picture almost repeated itself, only there it was her female co-employees smoking cigarettes. I made for the exit with her docilely following in tow.

AW, FUCK!!

The bare asphalt area was flooded with arc light glare leaving no shaded nook. The only bit of shadow was the anthracite-black meager strip of it cast by the pillar which held that dazzling arc

lamp in the middle of the yard... I was like that puppy named Tuzik who had snitched off a rubber hot-water bottle, yet couldn't find a place to tear it up... Reluctantly, I beat retreat…

Probably, the girl was disappointed by my not-soldierly lack of determination and too easy surrender to the plain minimalism of the conditions in the bakery plant yard. Anyway, the following evening she did not show up for the date in the park as we'd arranged.

I went a couple of circles along the dark alleys, stood for a while close to the brightly lit dance-floor inside which coral the youth of Stavropol were enjoying their recreation, although it was dangerous – a soldier in a casual wear outfit could be an easy mark for the military patrol. She was nowhere and the chances for her to pop up grew real slim.

"Got matches, soldier?" A dainty long-haired dude with a shoulder bag on a wide strap was addressing me.

I took the matchbox from my pants pocket. He picked it and unzipped his bag where, on top anything else, lay a cigarette pack next to a box of matches.

"Oh! I'm so forgetful. Will you?" He seized the pack and opened its lid over the densely lined filters. I pulled one out.

"Ah, it's so noisy here, gives me a headache. Will we walk a little?" With his right hand, he shook up the wide curls in his dark bob-cut hair.

...hell, what's up?. is he gluing me or what?. a short neat guy, long hair, a bag under his elbow... "Why not?"

We walked away, followed by the glances of those standing by the dance-floor, that part of the public who always keep outside. Strolling slowly, we headed nowhere in particular. He talked and talked with velvety feminine intonations. Then he told me a joke about gay life.

Some queen was arrested in Moscow and while they were beating him up at a militia station he squeaked, "Oh, Captain, I only wanted it in my mouth, not in the teeth!" A play on words, though not very funny, yet clear enough, as clear as what he was, it’s only that I just wondered what's next.

"Would you like some wine?

"Why not?"

We went to a nearby deli, there was almost no line there. Bubbling with joy, he asked for my advice on a wine over there, on the shelf behind the counter: would that do? As if I knew seeing the first time ever that "Mountain Flower". The shop was full of crude light and leering goggles of scanty buyers. He happily punched the check by the cashier, took it to the shop-assistant, exchanged the slip for the bottle and inserted it into his dangling bag.

We returned to the park, to its upper, dark, part, where there were no benches under the trees screening the rare lights from a nearby street. Standing in the darkness by the line of trimmed bushes, we drank some wine, not finishing it off, then he dropped right in front of me on his knees and unbuttoned the fly in my pants…

Well, at first, it was arousing, yet soon there remained just the feel of humid moistness down there. His head, barely visible in the dark, kept pumping back-and-forth. I slid the plate of my loosened gird-belt behind, to the back of my jacket, so that he did not hit his forehead against it accidentally. He changed the rhythm, diversified the tempo, took a breath for a moment then started again.

...somehow it's...monotonous...and for how long should I stick around like this?.

Chmo-ook.

...what?..another time-out?.

"You scoundrel! You've been with a slut! So you cannot come! A nasty scoundrel!"

"No, I haven't." I buttoned up under his plaintive complaints that I had such a matching member—exactly thirteen!—but to no avail. The discrepancy between his expert estimation and the measurements, once taken at a midday break at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, did not hurt me, taking into account his disappointment – lots of labor lost in vain, besides, it was he to pay for the wine.

"There's still left some – will you?"

"Ah, no."

I finished the sorrowful mountain flower off under his story that he was on transit from the Nalchik city, where some very important director of some very important enterprise made him such as he was when he still had been just a boy.

Then he gave me a farewell hug, but no kiss for such a nasty scoundrel who had been with a slut so let him now face the music... And he left making by his sentimentally luring gait for the street lamps beyond the park.

From that tear-jerking joke by the sad boy from Nalchik you couldn't but see that gay life's not a bed of roses – keep low and hide out until they catch you in the end. Poor critters... So what? Time to march home, ain't it?.

The postman handed me a letter from Olga about the letter she'd got from a fellow-serviceman of mine, who anonymously informed her of my amorous unauthorized marches in different directions from the location of Military Detachment 41769, aka VSO-11...

The insolence of filthy insinuations just made me furious, the more so that neither in the village, no at the bakery plant there was no booty whatsoever! And the gay guy could safely be counted out because I hadn't even cum. Therefore, in the letter of reply, I rightfully emphasized that there was nothing to speak of, and she should send me that anonymous piece of crap for carrying out graphological scrutiny and taking appropriate measures against that lying dirty bitch of my fellow-serviceman.

In her respective reply, she stated that the lies about my allegedly unstable behavior made her see red in which affected state she tore the letter into irrecoverable shreds.

> (...and here again, I stumble on that same transcendence matters. What for? What's the use of it for the anonymous fellow-serviceman? And if Olga just tried to check me, then all the same – why?
>
> These questions are another clear proof that the possibilities of a human mind are limited indeed. In any case, those of mine...)

~ ~ ~

Vanya left for the evening roll-call because it was my shift at the stoker-house. Gray came bringing along a *young,* a driver from the Simferopol draft. They both were tight, the *young* obviously had money, no wonder Gray'd palled up with him.

And then Gray kicked up some shitty dust crap, like, the buddies had some gripes about me. I couldn't understand. Which buddies? What beefs?

Now you'd see, says he, and latched the front door. The 3 of us went over to the workshop room, and Gray at once sneaked out of there. I did not get it.

And then the *young*, keeping his eyes away, asked, "Why finking on guys?" And he shot a fist into my face. I parried with my shoulder and jumped past him out of the door, the yokel followed. In the nook behind the furnace, there was a breaker, I grabbed it and shouted, "Gray! Who the fuck did I fink on?"

Gray stood nearby in the dark passage. Seeing me armed, he pelted body blows and I dropped the breaker. After all, it was grabbed out of pure instinct, kinda warning.

At that point, the iron-sheet shutter under the window in the hall with the reserved boilers moved, and Sasha Khvorostyuk from our draft crawled in on all fours, in only high boots and underpants, and with a towel hanging from his neck. Clear enough, he was going to take a shower in the pump-station room but the entrance door was latched from inside.

Seeing him enter, Gray barked out, "Get the fuck out of here!"

So, Sasha Khvorostyuk revved back, legs-first, without ever taking a U-turn, and Gray again turned to me. And now he saw my chest was bleeding because of my jacket was unbuttoned all the while, and one of his blows had torn the birthmark off.

Gray saw there was fucking lots of blood and he didn't know what was there in the room between me and the *young*, and he wasn’t gone too blind not to see the chance of getting fucked up into the penal battalion. So he just croaked a couple of times, "Look out!. The buddies!.." And they left.

Yet, I couldn’t get it what the fuck all that was about. Later, I saw him and asked, he did not say anything clearly, just repeated the same bullshit, "Look out! If there something.." In short, he’d been just selling himself for a fucking master-thief before the well-off young...

Since then, when at my shifts, I had something to busy myself with. The pump engine wailing, the boiler hissing, and, with my elbows planted into the round table, and my chin leaned against my balled hands, I was thinking about just one thing. Thinking for hours was I – in what way to bump Gray off?

Bumping off was not much of a problem, given the presence of that same breaker, but what then? It was necessary to whack him and cop out, but how? I didn’t even have a thing to simply dig a hole in the field, just that hammer-and-chisel in the workshop. To ask Ter-Terian for a shovel? Fucking stupid...

Or, say, take it to the pump-station room, in that deep pit always filled up with water, hitch a load and drop there. But what if the water catches stench with the decomposition of the body? The surest way was to shove it into the boiler furnace, the two-meter long flame shooting from the nozzle would incinerate it without a trace. It's only that Vanya would come for his shift and the whole stoker-house filled with the smell of barbecue – how’s about that?.

The problem had no solution and I simply kept moving, week after week, in a vicious circle until the on-duty cook would come and say it was time to turn the boiler off.

You never can tell, I might have coped after all with that quadrangle of the circle problem, but then the Tula draft was demobilized and they drove in new *youngs* from Uzbekistan and Stavropol Region, and Major Avetissian kicked me out of the stoker-house replacing with some *young* from the Pyatigorsk city.

Fare thee well, Vanya! And you, Round Table, the confidant silent of my fruitless designs…

Yes, I became a *grandpa* and I got it in full when, entering the *sorteer*, I saw there Vasya from Buryn with whom, as *youngs*, we had been slaving in the squad-team under Prostomolotov. Vasya was squatting over an *ochco* holding a newspaper open wide before his nose.

I’m fucked if it’s not the lost picture by the great Russian artist Repin – “A squatter in the reading-room”! Behold how all so grandly, with his belt hanging from around his neck, kinda stylish muffler, giving himself Great Gatsby's airs he checks the news of the day, sort of. And at

that point, the cuntfucker had finished me off completely. He raised himself from his full squat to a deep-curtsy level, like, a dance teacher demonstrating the technique of a reverence to the hole underneath and announced, "Good evening!" I was fucking fucked to pieces; that's some Vasya! Where did he fucking find such fucking words?.

~ ~ ~

My *grandpa* period of service unfolded rather chaotically. I no longer belonged to the gang of *chmo*men but the commanding officers were too lazy to transfer me from Fourth Company somewhere else for only 6 months. So, I had to work here and there, most of all at MCU.

That MCU had nothing to do with Missile Controlling Units, it was a mortar-concrete unit. Although, a *grandpa* wouldn't die of overwork even at so strenuous a workplace. I could shove the sand with a shovel as well as not shove the sand with the shovel, it depended.

The squad-team there was commanded by Misha Khmelnytsky from our draft who had turned so portly, with those Sergeant stripes across his shoulder-straps. And he roughed the *youngs* as we had been roughed so long before…

Then for a period, I was sent to a brick factory and there were neither squad-teams nor *youngs*. My job there was stacking clamp, raw bricks, in the ring kiln for burning. The ring kiln from inside is a low arched tunnel and it works continuously. At one spot in the tunnel, the mobile conveyor belt brings raw bricks thru the opening in the wall—be quick or they'll pour in a pile, grab them in time and stack in loose rows up to the ceiling!—while on the opposite side in the ring kiln diameter, the fire rages from the nozzles in the arched walls to burn the bricks. The heat, of course, was felt all over the kiln and you had to work in an undershirt, still sweltering. The job grew much hotter when loading the freshly fried bricks on that same conveyor belt but moving in reverse. The heat scorched your hands even thru the canvas mitts and was radiating from the walls around so you had to undress and work with only high boots and pants on. Take care not to touch the scorching wall with your bare shoulder. And the next shift would be stacking raw bricks in this very spot, and so over and over again without an end to the loop cycle of ring kiln…

When at home, I started to spend more time in the Company barrack. In case of off-the-wall situations, the servicemen from younger drafts approached me to get advised. For example, outside the brick-fencing, a taxi pulled up with a Sergeant from our Company – blind, deaf and dead – on the back seat. They called me, I went out to check and it was real easy because the grunting body stretched over the back seat was naked to the waist – yea, him ours. The taxi driver wanted no fee, thank you, says he, just take the shit away.

And as the Sergeant was a real boar, it took three *youngs* to plop him over the wall into a snowdrift from where he was dragged into the dryer room next to the cabinet-box guarded by the on-duty, where the jackets were dried after the working day, and there he dried off too till the morning.

Once some Uzbeks treated me to a dried melon plated in a braid, from a parcel they received from their home, sweet it was, I even remembered the parcel from my parents when I was a *young* – four cans of condensed milk shared in the musicians'.

And the Uzbeks came up to and treated me on their own accord, I wouldn't even know they had any parcel. Probably, because of, though a *grandpa*, I never hewed from their rations of butter and sugar in the Canteen…

The commander of Fourth Company, Captain Chernykh, was transferred somewhere from the construction battalion, or maybe his penalty stretch at VSO-11 was over and for that occasion, the lieutenant, Deputy Commander of Fourth Company, stepped into his shoes. However, the lieutenant's fists were nothing like the sledgehammers of the departed Captain and buddies kinda stirred up some fuss about TV set, like, why in Separate or in Third Companies they could watch TV, football and stuff while our box was dead for more than a year, ain't we humans? Stuff it!

At that point, the Battalion Commander ordered to collect the Company personnel into the Political Classes Room. He entered it together with the lieutenant and sat atop the desk, like, Prince Charming, where his trousers jerked up to the knees for demonstrating the gray fur above his shoes and socks.

And all of us facing him from the stools brought in from the barrack aisle, a-gape and ready for some sage advice. The Spanish artist Goya produced a whole bunch of the like pictures, series of them...

"Are you fucking going on strike? Eh? Stupid dicks! No fucking Italy for you here! The motherfuckers over there enjoy spaghetti! One macaroni can be long, another – short, because it fucking broke in halves!"

Here he made a pause in his cryptic monologue, perched proudly above our heads, turning from side to side his thick-rimmed glasses. Some swollen-headed fur-legged owl, not having the slightest idea what fucking folly he had thrown up right now.

And we all sat before him with dull stares full of faith and willingness which we should demonstrate to seniors in rank...

Yet, behind the statutory look that I was supposed to present each and every commander, there reeled on Pickle's tale about the hermaphrodite Sofochka from the Orel draft. Pickle couldn't say how much her parents had to shell out for the medical commission to turn a blind eye at certain peculiarities in the physiological structure of their child because of craving for a time break, at least in those two years.

That way Sofochka was classified as fit for non-combatant service and sent to the construction battalion where they make a real man out of anyone... Shortly before the Orel draft demobilization, in the barrack of Fourth Company, there developed an explosive love triangle, the *dembel* cutie involved. She was indiscriminately giving her favor to a couple of her fellow-

servicemen, though in turn. The buddies couldn't find a peaceful solution to the question: whose bunk bed she should visit after the lights-out.

Then in the same Political Classes Room, there was also ordered a meeting of the Fourth Company personnel. So I might chance to be sitting on that same stool which was seated by Pickle when Battalion Commander put the question squarely, "Sofochka, fuck the whore of your mother, is there dick or cunt by you there, eh?"

The private so addressed rose from his stool and, approaching the senior in rank, dealt a slap in the face, "Old goat!" Then, rolling her hips proudly, she returned to the stool with her back to the happy squeaks of a laughing owl.

Fathers-Commanders. Some fucking army!. Take it or leave it, yet I couldn’t shrug the Pickle's story off as some sheer bunk, the details were falling in all too readily with the surrounding shit…

I woke up back into the current meeting just in time for the concluding address delivered by Lieutenant-Colonel from his perch: "Fuck it! You’re given the highest matter! The brain! The fucking gray stuff!."

Hmm, looks like he’s got bored already into some other gyrus of his gray matter...you're in the fucking army now...aw, fuck it all!.

~ ~ ~

At the Morning Dispensing, Chief of Staff announced that the day before he saw a soldier from our battalion floundering on an AWOL in the city. He had even chased the motherfucker but couldn't take over, however, the just retribution could never be avoided and now he would pass along the ranks and find that fucking stain defiling the glorious name of our battalion.

And so he paced along, scanning carefully the rows of petrified faces in First Company, Second Company, Third Company, and Fourth Company.

...fuck yourself, Major!..there remains only the gate and the road outside it...

Keeping silent, he slowly retraced alongside the ranks.

...what a dolt!..if you were chasing someone yesterday, there's no fucking chance he’d attend the Morning Dispensing...go and wipe up your drivel...the buddy's now kicking back around in a drier room...or substituting the on-duty serviceman... it might have also been one from those squads who never come to barracks slaving at the city plants for months...

The Major started his third attempt, the fucking optimist.

First Company, Second Company, Third Company, and Fourth Company.

..so happy now?..the stupid head gives no respite the legs...that's some fucking ar...

"Here he is!"

The index finger from the boxer-like fist of Major pointed at me.

"What?! If it were I my ass'd be kicked before the Dispensing!"

"To the clink!"

The on-duty officer and two *dippers* with red armbands approached me demanding to hand in my belt and escorted me to the checkpoint guardhouse. On the move, I went on to debate that the bitch of Major knew it as well as I did that it was not me, but they locked me in the clink all the same...

About an hour later the on-duty officer unlocked the door to give me back my belt because I was assigned to the penalty work – sprinkling sand over the ice covering the road to the city. The truck with its bed-load of sand was at the gate already...

Squinting my eyes at the whistling wind, I was dutifully throwing shovelfuls of sand over the iron tailgate of the moving truck. Yet, when it entered the city and went after another load of sand, our ways parted at the nearest traffic lights.

Then I jackalled for a bottle or 2 and woke up at dark already seated on a bench at the foot of the Komsomol Gorka Hill.

It turned out that the blizzard meanwhile got fully subsided and only slow big snowflakes were descending from the dense dark above and melting on my face and my chest in the wide-open pea-jacket. The passers-by flow was adding which signaled the end of the working day for non-manual employees. They hurried home, they had nothing to do with a lonely soldier peacefully taking his rest on the bench.

"Hey!" Someone still shook my knee.

"Fuck you fucking fucker!"

"How dare you? I'm a KGB worker!"

"Fuck your fucking KGB!"

"Just you wait! I'll call the patrol!"

Then I boarded a bus crammed up to its utmost. I was shaking after the long exposure to frost on that bench and suddenly in the dense mass of passengers there opened a cleft straight to a vacant seat. Yes, our people always loved and respected the defenders of Homeland…

We played at the New Year party at the Culinary College. To be more precise, they played it and I was simply an astral body inertially following The Orion.

The autumn draft from Pyatigorsk brought to our battalion a certain Volodya, handled Long. He was not only long but also skinny, with dark circles under his haggard sunken eyes as fit for a perma-fried junkie. But he played guitar like the guitarist from Led Zeppelin in the album "Stairway to Heaven". Alexander Roodko worshiped him, and I also admired his technique but as a person, he was just a piece of crap. "Why are you the way you are, Long?"

"I always push all my shit up so that all of you piss off and leave me alone."

He had a pleasant laugh but laughed too rarely. All in all, he was just a kid who turned a god when having a guitar in his hands... It goes without saying, the construction battalion ensemble did not perform the numbers from "Stairway to Heaven" but Long at times inserted in The Orion repertoire so mighty guitar riffs which Jimmy Page himself wouldn't be ashamed of.

Some Long's buddy from Pyatigorsk brought him his own guitar from home and for that New Year season, he also became The Orion’s drummer because he and Long were in the same rock group which disintegrated after they drafted the guitarist. And when the New Year season was over, he took Long's guitar back to Pyatigorsk, you couldn't keep such things at the battalion's Club…

Yura Nikolayev, the star of Crimean taverns, and Alexander Roodko, a virtuoso from the Dnepropetrovsk Philharmonics, were the vocalists at the New Year parties. They sang, each one in his intrinsic and inimitable style, accompanied by the improvised riffs in the spirit of Jimmy Page and at times of Hendrix, for a change, who also was Jimmy, by the by. However, for a normal music lover from the hinterland expanses nourished on the undying examples of the Soviet variety pop, such variations sounded unacceptably cacophonous, since they were not Kobzon-like in any way. So one of the future cooks had all the right to approach Yura Nikolayev and ask, "Sogwe, can you play Gussian folk music?" That's how she was screwing the words up with her burr.

And Yura knew that Roodko had got completely fallen under the influence of Long whose word became the last and decisive as to what to play and how to play it. Therefore, he directed the girl straight to Long so that she wouldn't lose time in vain.

As for Long, sprawling on a chair with his legs so far away and wide apart, his parade-crap jacket hung on the chair back, but the khaki tie in its obligatory place, only thrown over his shoulder, he at that moment was absolutely lost in Dryland inside his mouth. And there he sat staring fixedly at some or another thing among the distant hazy dunes, licking his scorched lips with his raspy, dry, tongue.

"I am sogwe, do you have Gussian songs in yohg gwepetwahg?"

With a superhuman effort, the warrior on the chair collected all his will and might, concentrated, and focused his optic organs in the direction of the remote sounds to discern that there was a girl speaking to him.

"Gussian? Gwepetwahg? Go stgaight to Comgade Goodko!" and he pointed his index finger at Alexander, who stood by the loudspeaker box pensively twirling the volume knob of his bass guitar amp.

The girl was baffled, naturally, being so ping-ponged from one musician to another, but she was a sturdy backcountry strain and went all the way to The Orion nominal leader.

"I am vegwe sogwe," replied Roodko, and presented her that misty blue gaze of his, "but we genegally don't play Gussian songs." And he sorrowfully sniffed up his everlasting rhinitis.

He would be happy to say it some other way but he couldn't because of his own burr. But she did not know about it!. Now, go and talk about congenial complexes but everything—EVERY THING!—is acquired thru the exposure…

At that party, I had a kissing session with Valya Papayani, a Stavropol Greek woman. Nothing more than kisses. She told me she was a teacher at that Culinary College, and that she was twenty-seven years old. So the next morning Battalion Commander announced at the Morning Dispensing, "Yesterday, one of our fucking musicians spread out a sixty-seven-old slut at the bottom of a staircase!" That slushy brained fucker couldn't even see 27 from 67!. Of course, it was that piece of shit, the Ensign-supervisor who ratted out…

Two days later there was another New Year party somewhere else, but I did not dance there at all. Because of so superior grass quality, the kif was the weed of weed. We blasted on the stairs and then went into the hall, the guys took their instruments, all so tenderly and gently, and they started to play. And the music was strangely distant as if from over a horizon and—which was characteristic—somehow deadened. When leaning your head to the loudspeaker you could see how its front was quaking with the sound, but all the same, it kept muffled.

Then I went to wander around the hall, for a change. And the people there, all of them, were, like, some plywood cut-outs, that is two-dimensional, each and every one. All the time, I wanted to take a look at what was on the backside of their plywood, but it did not work out because someone next was flowing up into the picture who also was a two-dimensional one. And, from far far away, so low and slow, came the sounds of muffled music...

Occasionally, above all the plywood heads, there floated a pair of eyeballs on their pair of stems—like periscopes—it was those pseudo sound engineers stoned to death but still roaming the space. So funny bastards!. And they laughed too. Where did they get such weed?.

We were brought home by midnight. There was a creaking Arctic frost... Under the light of the spiky stars in the sky, we dragged the equipment onto the scene of the dead empty and frozen cinema hall. No one spoke a word. No strength; no desire to. Because of All was emptiness.

The emptiness of emptinesses and nothing but emptiness…

~ ~ ~

Ah, yes! With the same autumn draft they had also driven in *youngs* from Moldova and Moscow, but quite a few – about 10 men.

Moldovans had so funny last names like Rahroo, Shooshoo, though their first names were quite normal... Vasya Shooshoo received a postal notification about a parcel from home awaiting him at the city main post-office. When going to get it, he invited Lyolik from Moscow, Vitalik from Simferopol, and me. We collected the parcel and found some canteen in the city, on the second floor. There Vasya opened the box and there was,

"Wine of Moldavia, my boy,

Is to give us a blissful joy!."

Vasya, as the generous host, fetched some macaroni with something on top and was filling our cups under the table which we held out of sight as well as the bottles to cut out unnecessary discussions with the canteen staff. That way we finished off I can't say how many liters.

Well, what now? Saddle up! We went down to the first floor, and Lyolik took a leak there into the trash urn, while Vitalik, sort of, screened him off to observe decency in public eye.

That Lyolik was generally frostbitten. Once I went to the construction materials factory, and there was such a long conveyor-belt, mostly in the open, going high up under the roof upon a hill to carry clay or something. Lyolik's job there was to go up and down that hill with a breaker and prod what clay had got jammed on the conveyor belt. I can't remember exactly what I went there for, but the moment Lyolik saw me, the breaker in his hands simply fluttered from eager agitation, and it was in his eyes how really much he wanted to bump me off. Not for anything personal, just so, because I had turned up there when he conveniently had the breaker in his hands. However, he also hadn't the quadrangle of the circle problem solved yet. Bashing brains in with a breaker's not a big deal, but what then with the body? In short, he kept himself in hand at that time…

We left the canteen and strolled along in a friendly conversation; bright sun, white snow, life's beautiful.

Then Lyolik and Vasya started to sort it out whose homeland was better: Moscow or Moldova? Thus, word by word, they went over to gripping each other pea-jackets' breasts. But Vitalik—that's a capital fellow!—why, says he, on the street? Let's go in some yard.

In we steered into the yard of some two-story apartment block. Vitalik started reading instructions to them, like, sort of, a referee from London; no fighting with the belt plates, no kicking at the felled. They threw off their belts and hats, and pea-jackets, and – off they started the fun of heroes. Both of them over a meter and eighty with the fists like sledgehammers, and

each scored hit was sending echoes about the hollow yard. A-hey! Let's sprinkle the snow with the red!.

Vasya broke Lyolik's brow. Lyolik, bleeding, fell on one knee. Vasya moved back to the linen ropes with some washing on it because the real heroes observe the rules.

That moment some geezer in a sailor's striped vest trotted down the porch way from the two-story apartment block. Someone from the rats of his neighbors, he reported, had called the militia. In short, the match had to be postponed. Lyolik washed his mug with the snow, the opponents put their outfits on and we left the stadium.

But the fighters' agitation did not show any abatement. It might've got bad enough so Vasya and Lyolik were disengaged and held apart. Then we split into pairs, I led Lyolik ahead, convincing him that Moscow was the capital of our Homeland, the best city on the Earth. About ten meters behind Vitalik and Vasya followed, discussing epic values of valorous Făt-Frumos from Moldovian myths. Thus, in peaceful conversations, we slowly strolled on when all of a sudden, on the right, a Volga braked and 2 militiamen in greatcoats jumped out of it on the sidewalk. Lyolik and I unfastened our belts and noosed them round the right wrists, leaving some length with the plate on its end for self-defense. The militiaman on the left flicked his gun up. A ridiculously small black hole in the bright ring of reflected sunshine looked square into my face.

At that very point, the second pair of the peripatetic interlocutors arrived at the epicenter of discontent. Carried away by their discussion, they hadn't been looking around. And all of a sudden—ta-dah!—an abrupt change of the scenery: 2 soldiers armed with plates of their belts against 2 militiamen with a gun.

From the overabundance of feelings and associations, Vitalik's legs bent limply, his mouth went a-gape and only at the last moment, he managed to lean his back against the fence…

Glory, glory be sung to you, the blessed land of Moldovia! You had conceived and brought forth Vasya Shooshoo the Valiant! The true warrior, filled with the spirit of soldierly brotherhood and conbatist solidarity, in his mighty embrace, seized he the nearest to him militiaman—the one without a gun it was—and cried, "Run!" There was no need he repeated it twice to me.

" Oh, Gods! How frightened was I! How I fled!

Around and below me some fences, trees, alleys, hills, gullies, ramparts, and mountain ridges flashed… I came to myself only in some shed with wide lengthwise gaps between the horizontally nailed boards structuring its walls, and it took me a considerable stretch to bring my breath into a normal shape.

In the evening only Lyolik showed up in the barrack. He needed to wash his pea-jacket of the blood from the broken eyebrow. I led him to the stoker-house.

There they also had their news. The lining of one of the furnaces was all cracked, most likely caused by the overheating of the boiler. So that's why last month they took us to the city

bathhouse. Apparently, at the time of the accident, the smoke was pouring out from multiple crevices, carrying black soot which settled on the walls and ceiling in both halls of the stoker-house. My cosmetic overhaul was lost under uniformly even, greasy, black.

> (...did I wallow in rancor? There hardly was much of gloating though – by that time I didn't care a fuck about anything...)

Loose materials are normally transported in special freight cars without a roof, and the floor in such cars is a series of iron hatches. When unloading, you just approach the car and knock aside the huge hook that fixes the hinged hatch-lid which now falls down allowing the loose material to spill out thru the opening.

I do not know for which organization those five cars came to the station of Stavropol, but I can vividly visualize how they clang-flapped the hatches to dangle open and nothing flowed out, so they took a look from underneath into the car hatches and saw a smooth, fine-grained, monolith. The sand had been sent wet or got drenched by rains while traveling from some much warmer corner in our boundless Mother-Homeland and the frosts, met further on along the endless way, turned it into five huge parallelepipeds of carload frozen within the mold of the cars' iron sides.

There was no time to wait for the reverse transformation, for if you did not return the car within 3 days after its arrival to the station, or to your organization sideway, then it was classified as "rolling stock delay" and penalized with a huge fine which grew still huger with each additional day of delay. The addressee organization of the permafrosted sand lost their head – the problem seemed absolutely unsolvable.

And who, by us, is there for cracking any problems, however unsolvable they were? Who puts to rights the shit fucked up by the managing yet stupid elite waltzing from womb to tomb with their heads never examined but their tongues, and lips, and stuff ever at ready? Well, yes, sorry, you know the answer to this trivial one about USSR slaves… Yet, just in case, which factor have you to throw in for solving a problem of any magnitude, eh? You're kidding! I know that you know that I know that you know... So, that's why 4 truck-loads of us were brought to the Stavropol freight station. And for that occasion, they even gave us smooth-bodied steel breakers.

To solve the problem thru the hatches opened at the car bottom was out of the question because the monolith reacted to the hits from below by sending the breaker back at you with the tantamount force as foreseen by the respective law of Physics. We had to fuck it from the top and bore down along the car sides. The rumors had it they even were going to bring some perforators for the job but until then – to attack with what's in hands!

For a while, I was at it but soon kicked because of being much too fed up with the fucking monotony of the process reiterated in all the years of my service. However, idle kicking back around in that cold weather was no good for my tender feet which had lived thru too many freezing ups and thawing offs...

Misha Khmelnytsky handed me some money to fetch "warming stuff". He himself couldn't do it, he was a Sergeant in charge of the Uzbeks...

And where only do them buddies manage to get money from?

Come on, it's a breeze. MCU turned out mortar of different kinds in the quantities scribbled in the forms of application orders presented by the truck drivers. And if there happened no form with a signed order the driver handed over another piece of paper. To whom? To the Commander of the squad-team working at the MCU…

So off I started in the city... Because of being unfamiliar with the current neighborhood, it wasn't at once that I found the right store. There I shoved the bottles under my pea-jacket cinched over by the belt, which load made me look so stout. Who'd ever said they poorly fed the construction battalion?

I went back with my head kept down not from shame just because of the snow lashing against my face.

"Why don't you salute? Haven't they taught you?"

By the Statute of the Internal Military Service, you must salute every senior in rank, be it even just a Lance Corporal. Yet, the hard snow pelting prevented zeroing in time the officer who stopped me, and then how could I throw my hand up in salute which surely would set the bottles inside my pea-jacket a-playing jingle bells?

"My fault, Comrade…" I scanned his shoulder-strap and could not make it out – no stripes, like by an Ensign, and only one star, yet much bigger than that by a Major, and only then I saw leaves in his collar patches. "....Comrade Major-General, I was lost in thoughts."

"He lost in thoughts! Dismissed!"

And that was right – a general and a private in black shoulder-straps had, practically, no common gossip even if it was the only officer who addressed me with the honorific "You" in all the 2 years…

~ ~ ~

In place of Captain Chernykh, a Siberian, another Captain arrived to take command over Fourth Company, transferred from the Mongolian steppes.

He was the pleasantness itself with an exceptionally long hook of a nose reaching his upper lip constantly stretched in a gracious smile. When on duty, he did not keep to the Commander office but walked the barrack aisle sharing his friendly boasts about the money certificates he had brought from Mongolia, and occasionally started small wrestling matches with soldiers. And those matches made him so happy and agitated; his eyes began to shine, red blush crept into his cheeks and the hanging nose began to scrape already both of his lips.

I couldn't get it at once although something pretty familiar flickered in his grimaces, intonations, yet what exactly I could not...Damn! I got it! The boy from Nalchik!. But then, well, that's an officer...Besides, there was his wife…

In short, I dubbed him after the name of the Mongolian currency and the reasonable handle immediately took root among the soldiers of the company. So, at another of evening roll-calls, Tughrik once again got into how rich he was with all those certificates for tughriks, and that the first thing next day he was going with his wife to buy a new refrigerator, and a new wristwatch as well, because the one he had was just a shame and had to be thrown away, regardless of its name: "Commander's".

I could not stand it any longer and spoke up, "If you don't want to throw it away then give it to some soldier."

To which, he immediately called out, "Who said that?! 2 steps out of the ranks!"

I stepped out. He approached me and in a demonstrative way unfastened the wristwatch strap. "Here you are!"

I took the watch and put it into my pocket, although he certainly expected a different outcome and had to suffer that friendly small surprise.

However, the next day it was me to be surprised with the hell of trouble brought about by that fucking watch. Half-day and no less I walked the streets attempting to sell it and no one agreed to buy. They knew if a conbatist offers you a watch it should have been pinched or at least cut off from a cold body. And a good watch it was, I swear, once my father paid 25 rubles in Moscow for the exact same thing, but I asked just meager 7.

For the first time, I was not jackalling and stuff but offering a square deal... Nah, commerce is a dead thing if there is no demand. In the end, I took it to a watchmaker's, and when the mujik there suggested 3 rubles I just had no choice.

Relived, I stepped out of the workshop with the dough earned so honestly just to be confronted by an alky, "Hey, soldier! Buy a watch from me! I'll give it for just 3 rubles!" That's a coincidence for you! But those sots got outrageously brazen, they did not even stop at messing around with conbatists…

A week later, Vanya told me how a *young* cook was sleeping recently in the workshop of the stoker-house. Being the on-duty officer that day, Tughrik stuck his long nose even to the stoker-house and saw the *young* on the mattress spread over the workbench. He clutched the soldier’s dick and stuck like shit to a shovel, "Gimme! Gimme it! " And now, concluded Vanya his story, that Tughrik was already sucking two *young* cooks, while one of them was, in the intervals, fucking his wife...

Once in the barracks, the wafflister made a try to push me around, "Seems, like you think you are so great a *grandpa*, eh?"

I did not say a single word to it, but only protruded my lips to issue three tiny sounds, "Tchmo-tchmo-tchmo!"

He mutely turned around and walked away with his back stiffened at unforgiving attention. Since then, he dropped to notice me at all because I was such a scoundrel. “A naasty scoundreel!”

A newcomer *dipper* appeared in the company barrack who was transferred from another construction battalion somewhere in Dagestan where he went to an AWOL and caught his wife a-cheating on him with another man. He tried to raise dust for that reason but got tied up and locked in the clink which he flooded with so convincing promises to bump off everyone involved as well as himself for a dessert, that they transferred him to us – the remotest point in the same Military District... The soldier was of some Caucasian origin, I can't be more specific, in Dagestan alone there were about 48 different nationalities.

He did not talk to anyone and no one talked to him. Because of fear maybe, kinda when seeing a new beast in your native cage.

One evening, he sat on a stool in the aisle of the company barracks with a newspaper in his hands. I was passing by and some headline attracted my attention. I mean that all I wanted was just to have a look and give it back. But he replied, "Fuck off!"

"What?! Thief-swaggering, *salaga*?"

He jumped up to his feet. And I never had a chance to reach him, a whole pack flew in to kick up a blizzard. The private broke away and ran out of the barrack. And—which is characteristic—no *grandpa* was in that pack, just only *dippers*. Later I figured out that they were so pissed because of his making them fear him for several days; they were scared of his being not like them. No ethnic grounds though, just because of his family tragedy he harbored the danger of bumping you off and fuck the quadrangle of the circle problem. Any pack is cemented by fear...

Yet, the buddy ran away no farther than the Stuff barrack, he did not have the nerve to make for his native Dagestan... The on-duty officer came to our barrack and led me to the clink already occupied, in part, by a Dnepropetrovsk buddy kicking back around. The serviceman had some really nice weed on him and on high we went.

Then we lay upon the plank decking covered with some make-belief mattresses of padded jackets, and he started continuous lapping on about the whole of our great power since long being under the control of secret network of a certain shadow organization with well-developed structure of branched interaction because we all were moving toward one great goal, regardless of whether we realized that or not… In general, he performed much better than a company zampolit at the Sunday political classes, that kinda Knight Templar from Dnepropetrovsk delivering his profound briefing to the surrounding darkness in the clink.

But if you were such a fucking Frank Mason how could they fucking rake you up to a construction battalion, eh? However, I did not interfere with his structural analysis because he was the decision-making body in charge of that quite decent weed distribution.

Then the door opened and shed in some light from the bulb in the corridor while letting a droll Gingerbread Man of Tatar origin roll inside. Wow! Who's that with so round happy mug? Alimosha! What's brought you here, bro?.

On the arrival of his truck to the gate, the on-duty Left-tent suspected him of being in a state of intoxication to some degree, the stars even intended to search Alimosha and detect a possible attempt at smuggling alcohol into detachment barracks. At that point Alimosha began to knock himself on the chest, then he unbuttoned his pea-jacket, and flung it open to demonstrate what an honest serviceman he was, and as for the smell on his breath it was not his slip at all but resulted from Zhigulyovsky beer drunk accidentally in absolute belief it was lemonade or some other potable shit in the bottle which he came across in the dark basement, which bitch could it possibly leave there? The Lefty ordered to lock him up but Alimosha still could not shut up all the way to the clink. That was why he joined our conference in so immodestly unbuttoned state.

About 5 minutes later, Alimosha knocked on the door and asked an on-duty *dipper* if the stars was still around.

Nah, gone to the Stuff barrack.

Then Alimosha took a bottle of wine from the sleeve in his pea-jacket and ordered to take it to Vitya Novikov in First Company because the buddies there were already waiting for it. The on-duty dipper locked us again to run the errand.

Then Alimosha took the second bottle from the second sleeve losing so hard and shapely biceps, after which, falling into the classic groove:

> ***"The warriors remembered the days of their youth,***
>
> ***The battles they fought in by each other's side..."***

In the morning all three of us were, of course, released so that not to reduce the workforce called to fulfill the current five-year plan drawn by the Communist Party and the Government of the Soviet Union... As for the Caucasian with his threats of killing himself after a spree of murders in his native Dagestan, he was transferred to Separate Company…

~ ~ ~

I had already seen that Uzbek in the Canteen and remembered, for it was because of him that I came across the idea that you might get stoned even without any weed but by simply hitching your wagon to the wake wave of some other buddy’s drag... That time we went to the Canteen after the lights-out where the *youngs* doing their fatigues "on the floors" were already washing the hall.

We chose the table in the corner and landed there to be out of the way, they still had wide swaths to clear before reaching that area. The joint was circulating our chosen company in a reciprocally attentive manner and the drift took a ho-ho bent – we looked at each other's mugs and were wetting our pants with laughter.

And that Uzbek was dragging his soaked rag, to-and-fro, at about five-seven meters off us when he suddenly joined the crowd with his snicker... In short, witnessing our good-humored recreation, he got recharged and dragged the same way – in our wake, without any weed.

We called him to approach and offered the heel which he rejected. Well, it's clear too, the roughed *young* feared that the on-duty piece of shit from his company would drop in to see what's how around there...

And then I saw the same Uzbek again among the MCU squad-team of *youngs*, he was riding the same truck-back with me. And at times, when on the road, he sang songs in the mother tongue attuned to their Central Asian modal-tonal harmony. Not much of like the Italian opera stuff but, on the whole, listenable, sort of Jimmy Hendrix when without his guitar. The other Uzbeks got perked up and the road ended more quickly. Good fellow "aqyn", or maybe "ashoogh"? Well, in short – *lahbooh*...

Sergeant Misha Khmelnytsky couldn't pronounce his name in any way, and, in the end, he said, "Okay! You will be Vasya!" So, one time as we were riding home, Khmel commanded: "Vasya! Sing up!"

I marked that the Uzbek was in no mood, sad and reluctant, but Khmel did not shut up, "What? Can't get it, *salabon*? The command was 'sing up!'"

Well, the *lahbooh* started a song... The rest of the Uzbeks looked at him like angry dogs and scolded in their dark language, muttering, "You bitch, are you a canary for this motherfucker?" Of course, I did not know their language, but certain utterances need no translation.

Now, the *lahbooh* gave out one verse and steered to coda, but Khmel demanded more, "Sing, Vasya, sing!" So the soldier started again on high notes. And I saw how cleared up the Uzbeks' faces, they even laughed at one point.

Well, also quite understandable, the singer on the fly adopted his number to the situation:

"Vai, Sergeant, vai, I have fucked your Mom!."

But Khmel didn't get it at all, "That's it! Well done! More!"

And he got what he was asking for:

"Vai, Sergeant, vai, I have fucked your fucking mouth!."

The Uzbeks were rocking with laughter and the Sergeant liked it too, "Very well, Vasya!"

Here, the truck pulled up at the traffic lights and I, without a superfluous goodbye to the nice company of music lovers, slipped over the tailgate and down the short ladder... That time I slipped away to see Quiet Mouse.

Actually, her name was Tanya and she did not know that, to myself, I was calling her "Quiet Mouse" because when I first approached her in a trolleybus she was answering so quietly. And could I possibly not approach? Several times I saw her on the trolleybus when going from the ring road to the MCU.

She told me later, "I noticed you still in February, at the very frosts, your pea-jacket collar was wide open with the whole your neck sticking out." So motherly attentive. She was 2 years older than me.

> ***"... we always choose those very women,***
>
> ***who have already chosen us ..."***

In the morning, when she agreed to a date after the working day by that same ring road, I was not alone going to the MCU by a trolley. From our stop, we had to march yet along a lane, and there I said to that Moldovan, "Rahroo! Would you bet I doff now?" In general, there was snow all around, although it was March already, and I stripped to the waist strolling along in just high boots and the canvas pants with Rahroo carrying all other items of my outfit behind. Because I had got filled with so irresistible delight; but that was before her telling me about my bare neck...

Most likely, my topless folly walking resulted also from the meeting that god's fool... Back in February, I was for about a week hanging out at the 50-apartment block – that same that we had started with rebar-rod breakers, now it was already nearing its delivery.

So, buddies from a squad-team there told me about some old man walking barefoot in one of the nearby lanes. And I went there twice, on purpose, before I met him... It was a bearded old man, his beard was white and slightly yellowish, and apart from it, the man had also a hat and an overcoat on. His pants were rolled up leaving his legs bare down the knees; he swept a path in the snowdrifts with a besom. Though long and skinny, he hardly was a junkie because he had a drift of his own.

The snow was falling in big rare flakes, and he walked barefoot and swept an empty path in the empty street. I stood by for a while watching him, and he gave me a sidelong glance or 2 while busy with his business. We both kept silent, and then I left.

> (...everyone believes that they are right and that their way of believing is the rightest one.
>
> In Stavropol mujiks, the faith, for some reason, has a firm connection to their feet. Already in the third millennium, on TV they showed a man who had crawled on his knees from Stavropol to Moscow. To withstand the trying deed, he fixed pieces of automobile tires onto his knees and scrambled on along the highways roadsides,

replacing the tires as needed. For the revival of faith in the Christ-loving people of Russia and to bring God's blessing to them...

Well, I, personally, don't mind. My present confession is that of Tolerant Non-Believing. I entertain a strong conviction that true tolerance could happen exclusively among the unbelievers. All the rest are only pretending it while, in fact, they want to convert everyone else into a follower of their faith. Even the atheists are a confession like others, all too happy to bring you to their flock of believers in the absence of any god.

An unbeliever is the one who has nothing to believe with, because of the absence of corresponding organ, responsible for believing functions.

"... the doctor said, 'we'll just remove the odd appendix'..."

yet, being overly-blind, he chopped off the thing producing fluids of crucial importance for believing...

So now, crawl as far as you please, sit in full lotus until you bloom, knead the floor with your forehead—whatever!—if not in my kitchen garden, of course. Don't put to try my tolerance, please...)

But at the construction battalion that spring I did not care a damn about any theology when awaiting Trolley 5 by the Ring Road stop... Several of that number passed by before she arrived.

We quietly walked along the sidewalk by the host of five-story blocks laid of white silicate brick in the Lipetsk masonry fashion. Then we entered one of the staircase-entrances in one of the five-story blocks.

We embraced warmly and quietly, standing by the heating battery on the first floor, at the bottom of the staircase. Still standing, we quietly copulated.

Then we went out again to the endless sidewalk and I saw her to another entrance in another five-story block…

And for a long time after, it was not possible to repeat the warmly quiet pleasure; the staircase-entrances, for some reason, became too crowded... A couple of times we went to the movies for daytime shows but there were too many kids around.

One time Captain Pissak spotted me leaving a cinema with her. He called me aside and demanded to immediately cut all sorts of relations with her, although he could not present any sound foundation for his insistence. And that was most annoying – okay, suppose, you're Captain Pissak, then go and command in your First Company, why meddling if I had Tughrik to report to?.

But then I finally visit her at home. As it turned out, her staircase-entrance was different from where I escorted her on our first date, and the building itself was half-block farther along the endless sidewalk.

When I took my high boots off in the hallway and stuck the footcloths into them as deep as I could, so that they wouldn't propagate their smell too freely, it turned out that I was barefoot and even slippers did not hide that fact – like a god's fool only without a besom... At home, she happened to have her mother and a daughter of 3 years old.

Then her mother took her daughter for a walk to a store and we got seated on the carpet where she brought and opened her album with photos. Both in the pictures and on the carpet, she looked real cute that quiet mouse blonde Tanya.

All there was to do for having a sex on the carpet next to the spread album was just to reach out and put my hand on her shoulder skin inside her gown, but something hampered the most natural move. I do not know what exactly stopped me. What did I wait for?

> (....in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn't realized yet that all my grieves and joys and stuff sprang from that rascal in the unfathomably distant future who's now composing this letter to you stretched on my back inside this here one-person tent surrounded by a dark forest in the middle of nowhere and the never subsiding whoosh of the river currently named Varanda...)

Then her mother returned from the store bringing back Tanya's daughter and a mesh-bag bulging with bright oranges...

Our following meetings took place outside her apartment, and she began to show interest in studying my military ID. The balls about my ID locked up in the safe at the Commander's office did not roll far with her – she was two years older or have I told so already?

Then there cropped up some nagging predicaments and confusions in the otherwise peaceful flow of my service. I got in a scrape or two, and we lost sight of each other. Already before the demobilization, I went to visit her again, but her mother said Tanya was not home.

I waited for her at the staircase-entrance and, when she eventually appeared, we went out to a wide night courtyard between the five-story apartment-blocks and she succumbed both readily and quietly on a table in the playgrounds. However, I cum too soon, much faster than in that staircase-entrance which outcome I did not like at all and broke off our relationship, in conformance with the demand of Captain Pissak, Commander of First Company. Because, as it stands in the Statute of the Internal Military Service, "an order of the commander is the law for a lower-ranked serviceman"…

~ ~ ~

The closer the demobilization, the shorter is your sleep. Where have you retired, O, the euphoric times when I, still a *salaga*, was falling asleep the moment my head touched the pillow? An

enviable bliss.. And now, the evening roll-call over, the long aimless visit to the Club paid, again I'm plodding back to the barrack without any hope to get a wink of sleep... So, we get together, the nighthawks of the same feather, an upscale insomniac detail of buddies from undercover Royal Troops infiltrating the SA,

stretched upon bunk beds in one or another *koobrik.* We gossip of this, we gossip of that, or just drive a fool.

> (....many years later I learned from Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* that it was an old traditional pastime among *zeks*, inherited from the Czarist times when someone in the cell retold some novel by some Dickens with adaptations and retouch of the details to bring them closer to the everyday contemporary life. Only instead of "driving a fool" *zeks* called it "stamping a novel"...)

When it was my turn, I stamped a novel of revenge about two young lovers and a cruel baron from the castle on the hill. That heinous brute of a baron imprisoned the young man in the dark dungeon cell illuminated only when he brought in a couple of torches along with his beloved to use her as a sex slave right in front of the poor guy. A month later, the prisoner tore out the peg that fixed his chain to the wall and paid the bills for lodging and warm hospitality.

> (...the plot had nothing to do with Dickens or any particular literary work because when driving that fool I, with my closed eyes, watched the gossamer blouse of Michelle Mercier presenting her nipples in the first sequel of "Angelica". However, here arises the question: if I have farmed out my Michelle to the baron applying her (one whole month!) to tickle his senile fantasies, taking turns with his wolfhound and various objects of medieval utensils and implements, then (even though jerking at the peg in the futile attempts to pull it from the wall, but still collaboratively keeping time with the concurrent porno scenes) may it be I'm a pervert?
>
> Of course, the question was forwarded not by the listeners but by myself, and much later too, but still and all...)

During the epilogue centered on the methodical dismantling of the baron into the constituent parts performed in monstrously graphical manner, Khmel suddenly wailed, "Hey, on-duty!"

From the cabinet-box by the faraway barrack entrance, the on-duty came and Khmel told him, "He had fucking fucked already with his snoring, dome the fucker, let him RIP."

"Who?"

"In the *koobrik* over two passages."

The on-duty bent over the peace disturber and listened to the sleepy breathing, "No, not this one."

Lyolik joined in the conversation, "Who the fuck cares? Dome the fucker all the same!"

(...the depth of philosophical wisdom of the utterance still brings the tears of tender delight to my eyes.

"Who the fuck cares? Dome the fucker all the same!."

Here! Here it is – the quintessence of statuary and other service relations, the pledge of having a well-trained army, marked with combat zeal and readiness...

I'd be happy to add of the "Soviet army", the one that's plopped into oblivion... but who nowadays believes in Father Christmas?..)

A soldier-*dembel* pines away under incessant tension. A state of incomprehensible, groundless anxiety deprives him of sleep, appetite, and the ability to assess and conform his actions to the requirements of elementary logic and common sense... Every morning, the buddies from your draft get lined up in groups facing the ranks of the Morning Dispensing and, after a brief farewell from Zampolit, or Chief of Staff, they march to the gate by the checkpoint, they go home. And when would my turn come?!.

After idling around to 3 o'clock at the location of VSO-11, I got in the cabin of UAZ-66 truck used for fetching bread to the Canteen from Stavropol. Under the canvas top of the truck back, climbed Lyolik and some of his buddies, also going to AWOL.

The truck left thru the gate and sped to the city along the asphalt road wet after the recent thunderstorm. The asphalt closer to the roadsides was all ruts and holes full of rain water so the white car that jumped out of the road turn was darting along the middle. The UAZ driver dodged, leaping with the right wheels of the truck onto the muddy roadside. The turn was rushing at him, he braked and slewed left. The truck jumped back onto the asphalt and skidded along in a free-style gliding.

The driver, next to me, was frantically spinning the wheel hither-thither and back again. The truck kept speedily crabbing along, changing the sides at her will, paying no attention to whatever the driver was doing to the wheel. In the end, we were turned in the opposite direction and, after traveling backward for some time, the truck capsized... The embankment was not too high—about two meters—so we reeled just a couple of times.

Tumbling under the slope inside the cab of a truck, you live thru a strange sensation as if you were a fish in a bowl. Probably, that is weightlessness. The driver, the wheel, the cab door, and once again the hovering driver are slowly floating past you… I landed on him when the motion died leaving the truck on her side. Yet, the driver was the first to climb out thru the window overhead. I followed him.

The buddies from the truck back were already standing by the driver. Lucky fellas... On the road, the Battalion Commander's "goat"-Willys squeaked its brakes. To simplify the assessment of the situation, I merged with the green foliage of the forest edge.

"Who else was that?"

"I dunno, some soldier from Separate Company asked to take him along..."

After two kilometers, the forest was over, and so was the tense tremor in my hands, when I entered the city. I went to a cinema to take off the adrenaline rush. It was "How to Steal a Million" with Peter O'Toole. Or was it "The Remarriage" with Belmondo?

Nah! After Belmondo, I met Nadya, a student of something there. We walked for a long time, hugging here and there, but when I went over to kisses, she bit my tongue. "I know what you're hinting at!"

Stuff it! What hints were there? It hurt so, I could hardly speak seeing her to the one-story house where she rented a room.

She dropped in and brought out a can of condensed milk, kinda emolument to the wrongly wounded warrior. I hugged her for goodbye but shunt kissing. When she left, I looked at the can in my hand then at the wall of the house. No stray nails... So I placed the can on the railing and went away bypassing the pleasure for my bitten tongue…

Just only four dembels still stuck around in the construction battalion – I, Gray, Red from Dnepropetrovsk, and Alexander Roodko. I had already got myself a parade-crap, borrowing it from a *pheasant* in Third Company. Because of transference after one year of service to Fourth Company as a stoker, I missed then getting a parade-crap both at First and Fourth Companies…

Before the Morning Dispensing, there started up a round-dance by the *sorteer*. The eager on-lookers jogging to watch the entertainment informed hastily, that the night before Gray made a *young* truck-crane driver take him from a site to the battalion and, when they reached Separate Company, he got to the wheel himself and crashed into a pole. Nothing terrible happened, the dented truck crane did not really need a repair. However, Chief of Staff, when they reported to him on his arrival, went amok and wanted to kick Gray's ass personally.

"YOU FUCKER!"

What a mighty hook! The major put every kilo of his stout body into the ramming wallop and!. Whoops!. Gray dodged. Hmm...boo, Major!..and I had always thought you were a boxer...

The soldiers helped Chief of Staff to get back on his feet. The on-duties convoyed beltless Gray to the clink…

At the Morning Dispensing that followed, Zampolit announced that Red was going to the demobilization, and the next day Roodko and I as well. I approached him in the Staff half-barrack.

"Comrade Zampolit, I need a testimonial."

"What testimonial?"

"For admission to the institute."

"You are an absolute son of a bitch, Ogoltsoff!", blurted Zampolit out, " Are you fucking sane? An alky, junky, gangsta! I'll give you such a fucking testimonial that no Zona will accept you other than the jug for lifers! Fuck! It's our oversight that you get out of here at all. But you wait! The society will deal with you, they'll crush you yet and grind down to the finest powder!"

Then 3 of us were paid money at the Staff's accountancy. Wow! So I even had some earnings! 120 rubles for two years of honest work…

Roodko and I went to see Red off and to equip ourselves at the same go. When in the city, Roodko bought a sports-bag for his journey home, and I chose a "diplomat" briefcase, they were just getting in vogue then. The inside between the gleaming plastic walls got filled with *dembel* stuff: cellophane-wrapped pantyhose for Olga, a bottle of vodka for me and my father, and a crimson silk tablecloth with a fringe, for 7 rubles 50 kopecks, which Red bought for his mother and asked me to keep in the "diplomat" while we were sprinkling down the dust on the way home that he started. Besides, I loaded in the kicks bought by me – light and practical footwear with black corduroy tops for just six-fifty, because in the battalion I couldn't find high shoes for the borrowed parade-crap and went shopping in the pair borrowed from the Third Company on-duty Sergeant for just a day.

After the Red's way was sprinkled properly and our clamorous goodbyes were nearing the bus stop for him to set off to the railway station, I was not drunk and clearly remembered that crimson silk tablecloth inside my "diplomat". I did not remind Red of the gift he had bought for his mother. I stole it.

To give me one last chance, he sobered up, for just a second but completely, checking if I would tell him. His eyes met mine. The Red's attempt at the last minute rescuing ran into my snooty poker face. In drunken submission to the inevitable, his head dropped onto his chest and he staggered on never looking back anymore. I watched the distance growing between us in the sunlit sidewalk – 10 meters, 20… But I never called out, "Hey, Red! You forgot it, buddy!"

> (....and no prissy bitch on the Varanda river banks could ever bring about redemption for this my dirt...)

Next morning, Roodko and I stood facing the ranks of VSO-11 and Chief of Staff announced that we were going to the demobilization. We both made the "to left!" Clutching the black plastic handle of my black "diplomat", I followed Roodko's back and his blue sports bag, no thoughts, no joy, some odd emptiness. Just 2 *dembels* walking away, leaving behind 2 years amputated from their lives.

After a couple of steps we did, Battalion Commander spotted the corduroy kicks heading past him to the gate behind which the society lurked in ambush making ready to grind me down to powder at the nearest convenient moment. Battalion Commander made the last, desperate, attempt at saving the doomed, "What the fuck?! Watch the motherfucker in the fucking dancing pumps!" However, Chief of Staff cut short his fatherly protective impulse, "Let the fucker get the

fuck out!” said he, "The motherfucker’s fucking motherfucked already all and every fucking one here!"

Good-bye and you, Fathers-Commanders…

~ ~ ~

But even 24 hours later I was still in Stavropol, at the city airport of plain rustic looks. Just having served "two winters and two summers" was not enough, you still had to reach home.

I had a flight ticket to Kiev bought from the city Aeroflot office, but when I arrived at the kolkhoz field of an airport, the flight was delayed for an hour, then for another hour and only by noon the piston-plane AN-24 ran along the takeoff strip, and beneath the wing of the aircraft, thru the muffled hum of motors, floated rarefied clouds over topographic landscapes. The construction battalion stayed in the past, but it still hanged about and I was thinking of the First Company Master Sergeant who stuck to me on a city bus last week.

And it was so stupid, did he really need it when clad in his civvy outfit? Because he was drunk, he wanted to show off what an important piece of shit he was, that's why.

"What are you doing here? Back to barracks! I'll report to Battalion Commander at the Morning Dispensing!"

"And I'll say you were drunk as a swine."

None was said by neither one to nobody…

And that major also was in his civvy, so how could I know?

"I'm a Major!" shrieked he, "How dare you?"

Who'd guess you were a Major when you have civilian rags on? Look at me – all's in full view; the black shoulder-strap clear of any yellow crap means clear conscience – a rank-and-file construction battalion!

It's because of that barmaid in the café that we came to grips. She was a juice sort and, at first, it was me who she addressed the purposeful swing of her ample breasts to, before he flashed his rank trump, or was he bluffing? Nah, you can't dupe such a woman…

I still belong to the Construction Battalion. Forever. Some part of it stuck in me. To the very end….

But I did not think of anything like that then, I was just a *dembel* flying home. Not home meaning "barracks", but home meaning "home". Although my mother wrote in her letter that

they had sold their quarter-*khutta* in Nezhyn Street, and bought half-*khutta* someplace deeper in the Settlement. No fear, I got the address, I would find it.

But I couldn't think about Konotop for long, I got accustomed to thinking about other things and so I thought my usual thoughts… As we took the drummer from Pyatigorsk to the Military Flight School to show that he was real good.

There went 3 of us – Long, the drummer and I. We wanted the cadets from the vocal-instrumental ensemble at the Flight School saw for themselves that the drummer was a pro so that they would put a word to their zampolit to find him some position in the *chmo* by their School because he was to be drafted to the army. Such was the idea.

The cadets were, so too conveniently, rehearsing on the stage in the hall like a summer cinema, without the roof. They handed Long their guitar, the drummer sat behind the drums... Wow! The two dudes made a duet da bomb, a potpourri from Jimmy and Jimmy, they unleashed their souls in full letting them on a free flight... Poor fools! They sort of run a bulldozer over those rosy cadets in their blue shoulder-straps who needed a drummer of the kind that follows the pioneer banner next to the bugler with the red pennant on his horn:

du-du-du-dú! du-du-du-dú!

Not a chance they'd ever mention such a Drummer to their zampolit. So well-groomed boys, them those cadets; well-fed too...

Was it all over? No more evening roll-calls? Neither Zampolit, nor Chief of Staff, nor pieces… I was flying home; at home, everything would be *nyshtyak*! Not for nothing, I had been dreaming of it all those two years, or rather did not allow myself to ever think about home…

That was my first flight on an airplane; better than crawling endless 2 days by train. My wrist still hurt a bit; that fool of a bitch in the hotel the night before. She would give, only there was nowhere,” Let's go to your room,” said she. I asked the mujiks in the room, and they left.

So, while she was demonstrating her unbreakable virginity and maiming my wrist with her fingernails, they started to come back, one by one. The séance is over. But I didn't strong-arm her, she just grabbed my hand and started her claw-work. That Stavropol was just some breeding ground for sadist chicks, I swear.

Hopefully, Olga would not notice... but if she would, then what? You could get any kind of scars when doing your combat duty…

The AN-24 landed in Rostov. I went to the toilet by the takeoff field and, on the way back, a military patrol stopped me.

Right! Corduroy shoes is an utter breach of the Statute of the Internal Military Service, but I'm a demobbed *dembel* flying home, bros! My plane's already buzzing its propellers! They let me go.

At refueling in Kharkov I sat tight and, at last, landing in the airport Boryspol brim-filled with the summer sunlight... On that first flight, I thought it was already Kiev and, entering the bright sunny square full of all kinds of vehicles and scurrying pedestrians, I went straight to the big shield bearing huge "T" and two rows of chessboard squares, to get a taxi.

The taxi driver was a long-haired mujik about 30 in brown leather shoes with thick strings. I told him to take me to the railway station and he asked me to wait in the car while he would look for additional fellow-travelers; there still remained 48 kilometers to Kiev. He left and I remained to wait in the front passenger seat. It was hot and I took off my parade-crap jacket and, to pass the time and keep in check the growing inside tension, I stuffed and smoked a joint.

The driver came back with two more passengers to fill the backseat: a Major and a Lieutenant-Colonel, but younger than our Battalion Commander, and we started. Maybe, that driver in brown shoes scented the weed in his car and got carried away by some personal memories, but he drove like mad, and after crossing the Dnieper over the Paton Bridge, he dropped heeding the traffic lights completely... Or, maybe, the traffic lights had a day-off and it was a sunlit holiday of free driving for anyone to overtake whoever they wanted however they could...

Paying for the ride at the station, the Lieutenant-Colonel said, "Well, chief, you're flying indeed!" So, most likely, the driver got his drift on the wake…

In 1975, "diplomat" briefcases were a fairly seldom sight attracting attention by their foreign voguish looks which would be forgivable for senior officers but I, a private man, was stopped by a military patrol the moment I stepped into the central hall of the Kiev Railway Station. And the patrol, by the by, were cadets again, yet this time with red shoulder-straps. They checked my military ID and the demobilization papers, there was nothing to find fault with.

And then I made a mistake of looking at my shoes. The patrol commander followed my glance and traced back a flagrant violation of the statutory uniform. I was taken to the station military commandant office, under the magnificent stairs which led to the giant marble statue of Lenin's head, on the landing half-way to the second floor.

The on-duty officer at the commandant office told me to open the "diplomat" whose innards proved instantly that I was nothing but a *dembel*: pantyhose, a bottle of vodka, and the stolen crimson tablecloth.

"Go," said he. "Come back in the uniform shoes and get your case."

I rushed to the huge ticket-offices hall on the left. There was a long line at the ticket office for the Moscow's direction. In the line, some 30 meters off the ticket office, I made out a soldier in the parade-crap. He was a big man, which meant his feet were not small, and he looked sad because (that's elementary) he was returning after his furlough to serve another year.

"Where are you going?"

"To Moscow."

"Come on."

I led him straight to the window of the ticket office and explained it to the line, which all of a sudden grew so animatedly clamorous, that we had urgent orders to defense their peaceful sleep and safety at the remote border-lines of our Homeland. He bought a ticket to Moscow and I to Konotop.

When we moved away, I described for him the situation about the case. A *pheasant* cannot say "no" to a *dembel*. We sat on one of the many benches in the huge waiting hall and exchanged the footwear...

"Where could you manage so fast?" asked the on-duty officer at the commandant office.

"Bought from a gypsy on the platform."

With the case set free, I hurried to where the sad after-furlough buddy was hiding his feet in the statute violating kicks deeper under the bench. I landed down next to him, but we did not have time to change – the loudspeakers announced that the train to Moscow was going to start off the sixth platform, and we ran there so as not to be late... The strings on the borrowed shoes got loose and started lashing the floor on the run, but we boarded in time…

The train knocked hastily over the rails, it was carrying me to Konotop, yet my uptightness did not slack up, I urged the train to go faster and could in no way calm down... Only late at night getting off the train on Platform 4 of the Konotop Station, I believed that that's it.

"After his service done,

Came the soldier home..."

And I again rode the familiar Streetcar 3, but this time to the very terminal. The darkness outside the window made the pane-glass show a vague reflection of the khaki jacket and the forage cap of serviceman parade-crap... At the terminal, I asked where Decemberists Street was, and they told me to go right...

Protracted fences, dark *khutta*s behind their wickets, rare lampposts made up some unfamiliar outskirts. Having asked someone else along the way, I went out onto Decemberists Street and walked along it until I reached the wicket with the scarcely discernible in the dark plate marked 13.

I entered the yard and knocked on the first door in the *khutta*. It opened… Was that my father so gray-haired? When?.

In the light falling on his back thru the open door, he looked incredulously at my parade-crap, "Sehrguey?" Then he turned to the inner house, "Galya! Sehrguey has come!"

My mother came out onto the porch and buried her head in the breast of the parade-crap jacket, crying loudly.

Standing one step lower, I confusedly patted her shoulder, "Well, Mom, calm down, I'm back after all." I really did not know what there was to cry about.

> (...it's only now I realize that she was crying about herself, about her life flashed by in a flick. Just so recently she was scampering to the ballet school with her girlfriends and—here you are!—a man in the parade-crap in front of her, like, the son came back from the army. When?..)

My mother looked back at the small frightened girl standing by the kitchen table and, finishing the last sob, she said, "What do you fear, silly? It's your dad who's come."

Then she again turned to me, "How that you did not meet Olga? She went to the third shift, working at the brick factory."

“***...service done…***

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ My Universities: Part Two

That was exactly the moment which I never allowed myself to dream of in those 2 years when in the morning I woke up not from the bellow of an on-duty jerk but because of a female embrace, that of Olga. She came home from work, lay atop of me, hugged thru the blanket, and I awakened to answer her kiss. Our talk somehow did not come out well, if an exchange of one-word clues could be called a talk at all. And we looked at each other in such a manner that my mother, who was on her vacation, promptly took our daughter Lenochka and went to Bazaar...

Everything in life is surely repeating itself. What was, will be there again. The difference, if any, is slightly made by circumstantial details... For instance, that my mother returned from Bazaar (and not from a store) without oranges, and that nothing restrained me this time... As for the hieroglyphics left on my wrist by the claws of that hotel sadist, Olga, sure enough, marked them well, studied attentively and read their message, but not out loud. Actually, I did not insist on her sharing the obtained information.

> (...there’s no substance more flexible than time. The current year lasts elastically and shows no wish for termination, while a year lived thru shrinks into a mere point of time.
>
> A point has no length whatsoever, it ends at its own start. So, tell me any good reason to consider shorter stretches than a year as having even a point's worth. Really, what can you say about the last month? That it had several Fridays and there was thirteenth

among its dates. Right. And about the last hour? Oh, yes! It had sixty minutes... Empty term-juggling, jejune re-shuffle of numbers.

A decade, when lived thru, turns into a same-size point. After that point idled at school, a person begins to grow bristles. Another such point spent at Zona brings about aching joints (especially in the right shoulder), yet it still is just a point...)

A week after the demobilization, the two-year eternity at the construction battalion becomes tattered scraps of memories pinned onto a point in the past. The flow of ever-moving life carries all those points off, to hell or whatever other destination, and it does not matter where exactly, because you don't have time to ponder on such matters but have a more urgent task – to get along the streaming flow of life….

When bathing, there are two ways of entering the water. Following the first, you go into it step by step, your shoulders pulled up, rising on the tiptoes as the bottom grows deeper. The other way is to enter until the water is knee-deep and with a shriek (the element's not vital and might be left out) plunge headlong forward... It was time for me to dip into civilian life...

Overseer Borya Sakoon died neglecting his promise to retire in 4 years.

The Arkhipenkos moved to the Kamchatka Peninsular, which, reportedly, was Fishermen Paradise where fish jumps into your skiff of their free will.

My brother and sister graduated the Railway Transportation School and were sent to work off for their diplomas by exploration and construction of railways somewhere in the Urals between Ufa and Orenburg.

Vladya and Chuba returned from the army half-year before me and had time enough to acquire streamlined conformity to the concurrent life-flow. Skully had developed a solid bold patch over his head and looked for becoming 27, which age ended draft liability of a USSR citizen. He was exempted from the army as the only breadwinner for his single mother with her single mother, God save them both until his coming of the right age!

I was not much amused at my re-appearance in the Konotop polite society. We gathered at the Vadya's, I stuffed a joint, yet my friends did but a couple of drags each, just for civility's sake... From Vadya's *khutta* we ventured to the Loony park where The Spitzes were playing dances. When passing Deli 6, Vladya farted at a lighted match held by Skully close to his ass. The emitted ammonia flared up in a blue bunch of flame. It did not delight me though, having seen all sorts of suchlike tricks in the construction battalion, I did not care for the commemorative improvising.

In general, my way of getting on high wasn't fine with them, and theirs didn't turn me on. We remained friends but in the course of our subsequent lives, we flowed, basically, in separate parts of the stream…

I borrowed *The Adventures of Captain Blood* from the Club library but couldn't read even a half of the rubbish which once upon a time was my regular thrill...

"What do you keep in the newspaper atop the wardrobe?" asked Olga.

"A spike condom. Wanna try?"

"Nah!"

I was sure though she had checked it before asking, or did I overestimate her?.

At our having a walk, she introduced me to an unknown squirt in the running by civvy commonality—her co-worker from the brick factory who we met near Deli 1. A mujik over 30 said his name, I answered with mine, and we immediately forgot the just heard sounds. I did not like his smile that bared the over-worn gums receding to the teeth roots. Besides, some uneasiness about him made it clear that the meeting and new acquaintance was no good news to him, I regretted we had come up to him at all...

And on the other side of the Under-Overpass, near Deli 5, it was already we to be approached by a half-acquaintance Halimonenko, handled Halimon, who demanded of Olga a private talk. She asked me to wait and walked with him 4 meters aside on the same two-step porch in front of Deli 5. Some scraps of words in their conference: "militia", "get not a little" were reaching me. It was unpleasant to stand pushed aside that way, but so I'd been asked.

> (...another of my pesky traits is doing what they've asked me without giving it a thought and starting to think when it's too late...)

Their conversation ended and she returned to me followed by his owner-like "I told you!". Olga explained that someone attempted at stealing Halimon's motorcycle from his *khutta's* shed and he mistakenly concluded she had anything to do with all that.

> (...myths are different. There are useful ones, like the myths of ancient Greece, and useless as, for instance, that the army turns young men into manly men.
>
> Bullshit! Were it so, I'd say to Halimon, "This is my woman, talk to me!" It's not that I was afraid of him, it simply never occurred to me to say so. The army hadn't made a man of me...)

Olga suggested going to the Plant Park on Saturday, where the dances were played by The Pesnedary, a group from Bakhmuch. Their native town was the fourth stop of a local train in the Konotop-Kiev route, so it took just a half-hour ride to get there. What kind of group could be from such a backwater? Yet, Olga said they still played well, besides, at the dances, she'd introduce me to Valentin Batrak, handled Lyalka, the brother of Vitya Batrak, handled Slave.

The *lahboohs* from Bakhmuch sounded very good thanks to their keyboard player – a long guy sporting the hairstyle of Angela Davis. They quite decently performed "Smoke on the Water" of

The Deep Purple, as well as "Mexico" of The Chicago band. Then we were approached by Lyalka and Olga introduced us to each other.

Tall and skinny, with the long fair hair slightly cocked up at his pate, he had a same-colored nail-beard à la Cardinal Richelieu. A single look at each other's enlightened eyes prompted us that we needed a more secluded place than the dance-floor. Such a place was found and there we exchanged the credentials and reached consensus in the estimation of the sampled weed's quality, which contributed to establishing relations of friendly cooperation in the years to come…

~ ~ ~

My father disclosed his strategic plans how to implement the skills acquired by me in the army. His project called for adding one more room as well as the veranda to the recently bought half-*khutta*, and also paneling its walls from outside with brick and, since we're at it, construction of a brick shed in the yard, of two sections, one to keep firewood and coal for winter, and the other residential, kinda summer room.

I felt reluctant to clarify that all the training got at the military service made me a qualified trencher well versed in application of shovel and breaker, without further building skills. Not that I was ashamed of the fact, but because he was so happy at the prospect of realization of his fondly mapped designs. I couldn't tell him that "bricklayer" standing in my military ID was a standard bullshit. So I said, yes, of course, no problems...

A truckload of bricks was bought at the brick factory, followed by a truckload of sand, a half-ton of cement and – off went the construction works of the century! The water source, regrettably, was farther away from the *khutta* than once in Nezhyn Street, besides, the running water system hadn't reached the outskirts of the Settlement and you had to turn the crank, round and round, above a hell-deep well, spooling the multi-meter iron chain onto the windlass barrel to bring to the daylight a pailful of water.

That summer was really hot, both in weather and zest of the labor efforts that turned my father's plans into the tangible reality. As for the quality...Well, the seams in the masonry were thicker than ideal, but the plumb-line test of jambs and corners won't make me blush till now….

On his arrival home, a *dembel* had to report to the Military Commissariat and get registered there, spiffed for the occasion in his parade-crap. After those proceedings, I sent the parcel with the uniform to its owner at the military detachment 41769, after thrusting a three-ruble banknote into the jacket's inner pocket. Had the money reached the buddy? My mother told me she also had been putting a three-ruble bill along with each of her letters to me. Stuff it! Why did she never mention it at least a single time?! I would forbid so senseless practices because all that reached me were just vanilla letters. Well, they also were my relief, of course…

Soon after, I received a letter from Stavropol sent by the soldier-clerk at the Staff barrack of the VSO-11. He did not write a single line but, as arranged between us, enclosed a blank sheet of paper stamped with the Construction Battalion seal. It only remained to fill the page with the testimonial for admission to an institute.

I banged out a text to stuff the page up to an appropriate measure depicting myself rather positively, as a determined soldier at both military and political training, an eager participant in the amateur art activities of the battalion, a reliable comrade, an experienced warrior of the Soviet armed forces in general and the military construction troops in particular... Because not only zampolits could do the job, after all.

Then I asked my father to re-write the composition into the sheet with the stamp since his handwriting looked more like that of an inveterate army officer. He copied the list of my virtues, but somewhat hesitated when it came to signing the testimonial, "What if they catch you?"

I had to assure him that our Battalion Commander had no chances to disown his signature which he had to re-invent for every paper to be signed because of his chronic memory leakage. Grateful for my valiant labor that summer, my father scribbled a signature (any colonel would be proud of such a one) next to the seal stamp of the military detachment 41769…

I did not go to Kiev but, on the advice of my mother, I took my papers to the Nezhyn State Pedagogical Institute which also had the English Language Department. It took only a 2-hour ride by a local train to get to Nezhyn, twice shorter than to Kiev, and I did not care for the institution’s pedagogical quirk, most importantly, I would be able to read in English...

For the period of the entrance examinations I, as an applicant, was allocated a bed in the hostel by the main square of the Nezhyn city, opposite the Lenin statue and the massive building of the City Party Committee and District Party Committee (2 in 1) behind his white back. It took a bus ride for just one stop to get from the square to the institute, yet on foot you got there much sooner.

The English Department was located on the third floor of the Old Building, erected in the times of Decemberists by Count Razumovsky, and in those times of yore, it served already as the educational institution for nondescript students along with Gogol, the great Russian writer. For that fact, the institution had nailed down to its denomination the name of N. V. Gogol and planted 3 monuments of him around the edifice.

I liked the black-and-white alley of giant Birch-trees by the foot of the steep porch in the Old Building, and the white unembraceable columns carrying the classical pediment, and the Firs tall enough to peek even into the echoing corridors in the third floor paved with parquet, and the high-ceiling auditorium rooms.

And I liked Dean of the English Department, named Antonyouk. The sympathy was based on his not picking holes in my lame knowledge of English. I do not think though that he would be as lenient if knowing that my grandfather's name was Joseph, and my father-in-law was Abram. Dean Antonyouk belonged to the militant anti-Semite type. In the gloom of late evenings, Antonyouk sneaked to the time-table of the English Department to cross with his wrathful pencil the names of Jewish teachers out, and in the same manner, purged he the faculty wall-newspaper hanging by. Like a youth from an underground resistance cell struggling *gegen Befehle* issued by the occupant authorities of the Third Reich. However, Alexander Bliznuke, one of those Jewish

instructors, as alert as Gestapo, tracked Antonyouk down and caught him red-handed for which the latter lost his position. Yet, all that happened later…

At the written examination on Russian, I turned out a composition, graded 4, which, actually, was an untraceable plagiarism – an adaptation of the memorable message-statement that Zoya Ilynichna, the teacher of Russian language and literature at the Konotop School 13, rolled out in red ink under my subversive babbling about meditations by the window. And at the oral examination, I was in luck to pull the ticket asking to describe the character of Prince Andrey from the War and Peace by Tolstoy. However, the bitchy examiner still tried to set me back by an additional question, "Could you recite some poem of a Soviet poet, anyone of your choice?"

That was, as you call it, a question below the belt, but I recollected that Yesenin also lived some time under the Soviet regime, and started pouring out with a restaurant drawl to it:

"Oh, my leafless Maple,

Ice-coated Maple..."

Before my getting into the second verse, the examiner surrendered and yielded a passing score…

In the interim between the exams, I bought a couple of balloons for Lenochka. In the trade network of Konotop, such goods were seldom on sale and I did not like that her staple plaything remained the old suitcase preferred by her to a couple of worn-out dolls. She used to drag the scratched suitcase out of the bedroom and drop it in the middle of the kitchen to announce, "Cry, Grandma! Grandpa, cry! Lenochka is leaving for the BAM!"

It was about a year already that the Central TV news program "Time" was night after night presenting reports of labor achievements at the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway track, aka BAM.

"Come to me at the BAM

I am not a stuck-up Ma'm

On the rails, we'll have a sex...

I did not like that the child was growing so over-politicized, and I had warm recollections of how at the Object we loved to play balloons.

And so, one evening stretched out on the hostel bed, I watched the smoke from my cigarette swimming up to the ceiling which view suggested an idle idea of staging an experiment in Physics because there was nothing else to busy myself with... By its behavior, the smoke very clearly indicated its being lighter than the air. Now, if we had a balloon filled with it then the balloon should soar up! It only remained to solve the purely technical problem of stuffing the smoke inside a balloon.

The solution was prompted by my life experience. More than once I watched a couple of stoners assisting brotherly each other to get a swift lift, high as a kite, by the trick code-named "locomotive". One of the bros would put a sparked joint into his mouth reversely, the burning end first, observing, sure thing, precautions to avoid inner burns, and then the benefactor blew. As a result, a squirt of thick smoke was pouring from the tube-mouthpiece of the Belomor-Canal cigarette to be immediately consumed by the relief target.

Yet, for the outsider of a balloon, a straight cigarette would also do, right? So, I lit it, inserted the mouthpiece into the balloon's neck, and blew from the opposite end a lungful of air. But it should be kept in mind that the "locomotive" smoke is eagerly sucked and kept in by the consumer, whereas the air, when forced into a balloon, tries to escape the rubber body thru its neck. In short, the amount of the smoke-mixed air, which I had blown in, burst back thru the cigarette mouthpiece and knocked the smoldering tobacco out, straight into my throat.

> (..."When a dog has nothing to do, he licks his balls." my father used to say.
>
> Sometimes it's better to lick than bungle about the aeronautics...)

Sure enough, I coughed the tobacco out after its smoldering fibers scorched my larynx somewhere behind the glands. That's what happens when a philologist meddles with Physics matters. Firstly, it hurts, and then go to pharmacies in search of Furacilin for treating burns.

> (...but what hurts even more, hurts to tears, that no lessons may prevent my future follies. Certain morons are not able to learn from their own experience because it is not possible to foresee which other locomotives with balls, or vice verse, will inspire my inquisitive mind tomorrow...)

I was matriculated at the English Department, but the triumphant departure to Konotop was somewhat clouded by having words with the commandant of the hostel who found a shortage of one pane in the window of my room. The glass had not been in place when I moved in there, but the jackass did not listen to my explanations, demanding retribution in ready money, or finding a workman who would insert the pane. Beside not having the specified amount, I also resented the unjust rip-off. When left alone in the room, I went up to the upper floor and pulled a glass from the window in the toilet. The pane size fitted perfectly, I do love the standardization! The commandant still croaked that the glass had obviously been in use and I proclaimed that it was bought at a chance seller in Bazaar, at which transaction I missed to notice those paint smudges along the edges.

> (...our old good world is very repetitive, at any rate, my arguments when dealing with commandants are all alike...)

~ ~ ~

Olga resisted the very idea of my striving for higher education, moreover in the field of pedagogy. As for English, she did not consider it a specialty at all because everyone should know the language nowadays, so she was told by a baby doctor who visited to treat Lenochka's cold. I

responded by calling the doctor smart dumb-ass and swore to come to Konotop on every Saturday. Yet, Olga stopped pecking at me only after I agreed that she would dye my hair with hydrogen peroxide. That's why in the all-out picture of the 1975 first-year students at the English Department of the Nezhyn State Pedagogical Institute, aka the NGPI, I had the looks of that fancy ass-hole of a protagonist in *The Hero of Our Times* by Lermontov—a blond with the dark mustache…

Our course was split into four groups of twelve students each, with only one male per group. The exactly same male-female ratio was maintained at all the other courses of the English Department.

Because of my obviously dyed hair, some local young fairy started trailing and coveting me with signs of care and close attention along with insistent proposals to make friends which solicitations were full of wooing intonations like those by the boy from Nalchik. After a shock sample of construction battalion parlance, he bleated that his life was ruined for he had missed his chance of going to Moscow because of me, and pissed off.

Olga immediately informed me that in Nezhyn I was hanging out with fags. To my demand of specifying the source of the fabrication, a certain Shoorik was indicated as the horse mouth, whose sister studied at the Physics and Mathematics Department of the NGPI.

At my request, Lyalka called Shoorik out of the Loony dance-floor into a dark alley where I allegedly wanted to have a talk with him. I hit the summoned Shoorik on the jaw and he did a runner with all deliberate speed. I didn't pursue though and only roared after him in the best traditions of construction battalion, "Come here, fucker!" Rather an odd if not counterproductive way to lure back an escapee running for their dear life, if you come to think of it….

The classes in the Old Building lasted from nine to almost three and then I went along the wide asphalt walk towards the sandstone-tiled New Building in front of which there stretched a row of thick sprawling Willows screening beneath their canopies straight benches without backrest... In 30 meters from the New Building's left corner, there loomed the red-brick five-story block of the student hostel, aka the Hosty and alongside if, after another 30 meters, there stood the canteen, a tall two-story Mausoleum-like structure styled as a couple of glazed cubes.

The large hall on the second floor contained a crowd of four-sitter square tables wrapped in the hum and babel of students' voices, of water whooshing in the dishwasher's, snaps of kitchen utensils, clicks of plates with chosen *havvage* landing on the plastic trays being dragged along narrow railings by the kitchen counter towards the woman in the stiff tube of white cloth upon her head behind the cash register in the end of the multi-rail-path.

With a fleeting glance at the tray's load, the nun of the order of Starched Cashiers announced the verdict—from 60 kop. to 1 ruble—accepted the payment, gave the change, and her box spat out another paper slip onto the heap of the neglected checks... At times some students, with a quirk for research, took the same set of food while in different points in the moving line – just so, from purely scientific curiosity. The payment for those control sets varied. The cashier created the

price on the fly, by the inspiration prompted by the client's looks, the outside weather conditions, and the level of noise in the hall...

After finishing their meal, guests went to the first floor, past the shortest embodiment of human wisdom $E = mc^2$, painted on the wall at the staircase landing. Plagiarizing a Russian byword, an empty stomach makes you a slow learner, while after the meal the theory of relativity and stuff might seem more digestible, you never can tell.

> (....by the by, it's a moot point who's wiser – Einstein or the guy who found such a fitting place for the application of the genius' formula...)

On the first floor, there was the constantly locked hall of celebrations that hosted a couple of weddings per year. Going out onto the high porch you could still turn into a glass door of a small confectionery with 2 saleswomen in nun whites, and the usual assortment of sand cakes for 22 kop., two-day-old donuts, and tobacco products. Cigarettes were not too good, rather on a dampish side, except for "Belomor-Canal" of the most excellent quality – stuffed with dry and finely chopped tobacco, which is very important.

Once, being on high, I demanded from the saleswomen "The Ledger of Complaints and Proposals", which presence was the must in any Soviet store, and scribbled thanks on the Belomor account, concluding it "be blessed, dearest dears!" A graphomaniac would always find a vent for his unpretentious passion...

Now you could return to the five-storied Hosty. 3 columns of wide-section (36 cm) iron pipes, paint-coated in the tonality of medium rust, supported the flat concrete canopy over the wide two-step porch at the entrance. The columns, when knocked at, sounded differently letting play the phrase "do-re-mi-do-re-do!", thanks to precise tone pitch of the iron pipes. Although the institute had, among others, the Department of Music Teachers, yet the honor of that particular music discovery belonged to a student of the English Department who graduated before my enrollment. As for the mentioned music phrase, it was an old-time curse used by the *lahboohs*. Wherever you played it, any *lahbooh*, if he happened around, would get at once that old good jive running, "Go and fuck yourself, jerk!" One syllable for each note, exactly…

The glazed door on the porch let you inside the small glass-walled cage of vestibule with another door opening into the lobby in whose right corner there stood a sizable desk with the on-duty watchwoman behind it guarding the square shield of plywood fixed on the wall, with rows of nails for hanging the keys to the rooms in the Hosty. If the nail beneath the ink-written '72' was empty, then one of my roommates had already grabbed the key and passed over to the room. In the long corridor behind the lobby you could take any, either right or left, turn and reach one of the two staircases to the upper floors, yet the left one was the shorter route to Room 72.

Each of the floors belonged to a different department, aka faculty. Thus, the second floor was inhabited by the students of the Biology Department, aka Bio-Fac. The English Department, aka Anglo-Fac, possessed the third floor. Mathematicians from the Phys-Mat lived on the fourth, and the uppermost—fifth floor—was for the Music-Pedagogical Department, aka Mus-Ped...

On any floor, leaving the staircase landing, you entered a long, pretty dark, corridor to which the light was getting only from its opposite ends, thru 2 windows (1 per each end) distended from the floor to the ceiling. The rest of the scenery was made of walls with rows of closed doors above the smoothly ground dark-gray concrete in the floor.

Room 72 followed the washroom of 6 sinks, which was the first from the end window, opposite the door to the men's toilet on the other side of the same window. At the faraway opposite end of the long corridor, everything was exactly the same, only the toilet there was for ladies.

On entering the room, you got into its narrowest part squeezed between the 4 plywood lockers reaching the ceiling—2 of them on each side. After the lockers, the room became a bit wider to accommodate a bed, a cabinet-box, and another bed lined under the walls which pattern was mirrored by the same arrangement under the opposite side wall. The wide, three-winged, window was right ahead between the 2 and under its sill were 2 more cabinet-boxes pressed to the pig-iron radiator of the central heating system. The center of the room was occupied by the dark-brown varnish-scarred veteran of a table with 4 wooden chairs pushed under, so that you could bypass it when heading to the window.

The soiled spots in the wallpaper marked the places where the inmates or their visitors habitually leaned their heads taking a seat upon the bed covers, while the wallpaper cleaner stretches bore dense columns of inscribed card debt records and scores in Throw-in-Fool competitions.

The round tin box in the center of the whitewashed ceiling slab contained 2 naked light bulbs of low voltage. The room was also equipped with 2 wall sockets (the left one falling out from the partition with the following room but it was a double partition so the socket couldn’t be pushed in from outside while from inside you had to keep in mind the socket’s state and withhold too wide gesticulation in its vicinity that’s why the rented tape recorder was always plugged into the wall to the washroom) plus the switch by the door. However, from midnight till six in the morning the electricity in the Hosty rooms was turned off by the on-duty watchwoman, with the general switch near her post. G’night, sleep tight, Jesus Christ Super Star, in the flock of rented tape recorders on the window-sills of all 5 floors!.

For those eager to scratch and gnaw into the granite of science, there was a reading room in the corridor on the first floor next to the hall with a TV box. In both the electricity was in place thru all the night. However, the reading room got empty long before the midnight, as well as the hall with the TV, except for the nights of an international football match or a new 4-sequel musical with Andrey Mironov on…

All of my 3 roommates in the pencil-box room were fourth-year students... Fyodor Velichko came from a hinterland village in the vast Ukraine-Mommy. The straight thick hair, jutting above his wide forehead, was somehow reminiscent of the straw-thatched barn roof on a quiet farm.

Sasha Ostrolootsky was brought up and educated in an orphanage, which didn't prevent his mapping out plans to marry the daughter of Professor Sokolov from Moscow. No one besides him had ever met or heard about both Professor and his daughter... Like Fyodor, he was not very tall, but looked more sporty, besides, his fair hair was softer, his nose was longer and he had the

reputation of Casanova. Sasha's favorite pastime was visiting girls' rooms on the floor to drink tea with sweets to which outings he was often accompanied by another inhabitant of Room 72, Marc Novoselytsky from Kiev.

Marc had a broad face with icicles of black hair hanging to the rim of his glasses and indispensable smirk beneath his thin mustache, he looked the most well-fed of my roommates. Visiting the room of Sveta Havkina and 3 more freshman girls, Marc and Sasha paid for her tea and jam with most black ingratitude. Sprawling on the covered beds of the inmate girls, they started a sneer-fleer-jeer discussion full of unworthy innuendos in the address of those low-grade Jews.

Sveta, a pretty black-curled daughter from one of the 12 tribes of Israel from Chernigov, was changing in her face to each of their anti-Semitic remarks but suffered in silence. For the next 2 days she was utterly out of sorts until Ilya Lipes, a third-year student with sideburns like in Pushkin's self-portraits, did explain to her that those ungrateful pigs were, actually, Jews themselves...

The fourth-year student Yasha Demyanko from Poltava rented a room somewhere in the city but visited his course-mates almost every evening. The people of Room 72 spend their spare time (which was nearly the only type of time by them) in constant Throw-in Fool battles at which occupation Yasha's skills were simply superb and he also was the tallest of us. He had a long Baltic face in the frame of long brown hair with a natural wave and, likewise Fyodor, he spoke only and exclusively the Ukrainian language. The rest of us communicated in Russian but we all perfectly understood each other…

The fourth-year student Sveta, a native of the Nezhyn city, kept visiting our room regularly. She was the official bride of Marc and even their respective parent pairs had already known each other. Sveta did not play cards, she kept sitting on the Marc's—and only his—bed and held him in an iron grip, "What's that, Marik? I did not get it!"

"Well, Svetik, well, I just..." with cowardly lowered eyes behind his glasses, Marc began to meekly defense himself until the other players would express their indignation with the procrastination caused by his tarried move in the game.

Then he escorted her home, came back and, after they turned off the electricity in the rooms, he brought in his course-mate Katranikha. For a couple of minutes, they silently creaked his bed and parted. And that was correct because of the strenuous study-work awaiting us all in the morning…

~ ~ ~

Katranikha had a warmly affable disposition, widely open, unreserved and very hospitable. One burglar, after having broken into the Republican Fashion House in Kiev, decided it was time to lie low. He got off a local train in Nezhyn and spent a whole week in her room because they met each other on that train. And every night he took her and her roommates to one or the other of Nezhyn restaurants.

A week later two operative officers of the criminal investigation ascended the third floor in the Hosty, tracing the indications of loot from the Republican Fashion House, which the burglar tried to dispose of at the Nezhyn Bazaar. One of them took a black pistol from inside his coat and knocked on the door of Katranikha's room which the burglar had already cleared out of. He was arrested only a month later in the city of Mariupol. Anyway, that was what the operative with the black pistol told his wife, also a fourth-year student at the English Department…

Soon after, Katranikha invited me to the Leninist Komsomol Cinema, about two hundred meters from the canteen, across the road from the lake in the Count's Park. We watched "Zorro" starring Alain Delon. Well, I don’t know, but in my humble opinion, the final fencing scene in the movie was way too long and boring.

On the whole, the time she spent on me was lost in vain, I couldn't consider her for practical purposes because she was a girl of my cohabitant in the pencil-box room. To tell the truth, I always stayed somewhat old-fashioned…

Starting my student life, I never fancied any breach of my marital fidelity, it was unthinkable, for about a week or so. But then on our floor in the Hosty, there occurred a vacant room and the key incidentally got to my hands, with a chance addition of my course-mate Irina from Bakhmuch. We spent all night in that room and she proved to be an ardent adherent of strictly tactile pleasures with the firmly negative stance towards trespassing the rubber band in her panties.

Again?! What for?!. Her boobs were undeniably magnificent, with some strange nipples though, I had never come across so tiny ones, the size of a pinhead. However, keeping oneself all night long busy with only the bust is a hell of monotonous occupation.

Two days later she resolutely blocked my way in the half-dark corridor of the Hosty. "You did not say you were married!"

"You didn't ask."

> (...and here, in my opinion, lies the main flaw in civilization. Take me, for instance, I have nothing but the purest and most natural inclination for a no-cheating trade after the pattern "you give me, I give you". For a fully fair trade of pleasures based on the mentioned principle, I am prepared to provide all the pleasures available from my male body—restricted in no way—in exchange for delights obtainable from her female one. But instead of a young Bacchante rocking with fiery mad ecstasy in my embrace I—for the damnteenth time!—run into the disgusting attempt at using her cunt as a trap.
>
> Bitter are the fruits of yours, O, civilization! Toy with the boobs and piss off! Marry first, and then have it in slathers, ladle or spread it as you like, but no sooner... And no one cares a fig about your shattered self-respect. Couldn't bring to a passionate response?. Hmm...and you call yourself a man after that, eh?.
>
> And—the most perplexing puzzle—a mere outline of the word "rape" gives me a boner, but I’ve never tried to put the term into effect in a real-life situation, not even with the

recusant who lay with me of her own free will. She sez, "No, stop it..." and I begin to tame my horny ambition, whatever the cost. Probably, because I love fair deals.

Besides, I was born too late – after the origination of the family, private property, and state...)

Presently, the buses in the Nezhyn city stop next to the railway station, but in those times the highway bridge over the railway tracks was not yet in place and the bus stops were reached by the high footbridge overpass... Then you had to wait for a bus, scramble to get on board, and stand squeezed in the crowd for all the long ride to the main square. From the square there remained a short walk down to the bridge over the Oster river on whose right bank stood the Hosty, the New and the Old Buildings, as well as the other campus structures together with the Count's Park behind them holding the sky aloft upon its columns of dark ancient Elms within the bounds of a long lake of horseshoe outline…

It took me one of those prolonged bus rides from the station to the main square, to persuade Yasha Demyanko to sell me a shirt. A white shirt with the grid pattern of blue-and-yellow, thin, widely set, stripes. Coming back to Nezhyn after the weekend at his home city of Poltava, Yasha brought that shirt for selling at a negotiated price, and in the crowded bus, he opened his grip to flash the goods before me.

I fell for it immediately, but he was obstinately refusing to sell it because he had another such shirt on and both of us were from the same Department. In his opinion, it was not the right thing for 2 persons to be dressed alike when in one place... In the most solemn terms, had I to swear to never ever put it on without his expressed permission, or when his one was washed or left behind in Poltava.

(...we lived in the deficiency era, of which fact we were well aware. So, I wasn't stunned at all when a girl sitting next to me at a general lecture, flashed wide runs in her pantyhose aptly fixed with a blue electric tape high up her thigh.

So what? In upright posture her skirt hid both the tape and runs leaving just legs in the pantyhose of enviable *Conte* brand… yes, it was the post-mini epoch already...)

~ ~ ~

Fyodor, Yasha and I became bosom friends on the common basis of dry wine. After classes, we started to the deli located round the corner of the department store opposite the church where Bogdan Khmelnytsky centuries ago married another of his wives, to buy 4 to 5 bottles holding 0.75 liters of white dry wine each. Yasha was a firm supporter of moderation and his dose constituted just one bottle in the haul, while Fyodor and I entertained more liberal perspective.

From the deli, we proceeded past the Bazaar and the restaurant "Polissya" to the second bridge over the Oster River, from which long Red Partisans Street started and went off to finally turn right, towards the highway beyond the city. But our route was much shorter and, from the bridge,

we climbed down into the tall grass on the left riverbank nearby the Catholic Chapel used as the Youth Sports School grounds, snug and cozy place to stretch out for a libation.

A finger-thick layer of sediment covered each bottle bottom, but we knew how to drink from the neck without stirring it up. The emptied bottles were thrown into the nearly motionless waters of the Oster because somewhere downstream the floodgates of the dam were shut. After a short-lived reproachful popping, the bottles froze on the water, kinda fishing rod floats with their necks in osculatory appeal to the sky.

> (...environmental pollution fighters would not approve of such behavior, but young carefree students are not turned on by so minor issues.
>
> Besides, when compared to the exploits in the student life of Mikhail Lomonosov at German universities, we were a tender flock of fluffy lambs. Reading about his feats, you grow to understand: it was not for nothing that the man had walked on foot from Arkhangelsk itself to Moscow... Passion for knowledge knows where to direct you...)

And, lying in the tall grass, we carried on enlightened exchange on this and that, and other such things, interspersed by prolonged gulps before to change the subject. The chat was our snack, like chomping the well-known fact that when the Oster had still been navigable, a merchant boat full of treasures sank someplace there. And recently the Japanese came up with a proposal that they would clean up the entire riverbed of the Oster, provided that they get the treasure, but the ours responded: "Piss off, Japs! Don't be too cunning!"

Or, for a change, we were discussing Latinist Litvinov, that ruthless beast of an exact executioner.

"Read sentence 7 from Exercise 5." But how could you possibly read it when seeing for the first time in your life?

"Sentence 7 comes after Sentence 6."

"..."

"Sentence 7 comes before Sentence 8."

"..."

"Get seated, please. Your mark is two."

Wholly serene, as cool as a cucumber, with his head like a light bulb, maybe, a bit more hair on it, he turns to the next victim... Thus, the poor students did not have a choice but to dub him with the handle of "Lupus".

His beautiful wife was a fourth-year student already, and in her first year, at the winter examination session, she managed to pass the credit in Latin only at her sixth try. He entered the

record into her Grade Book, and articulated coolly, "Be smart, and marry me." Figuring out that in the summer session it would be not a credit but the examination in Latin, she realized that the resistance was of no use...

After elaborate discussion of the cadre policy at the NGPI, we glided into a trifling gossip about our roommate Ostrolootsky who's cool only at staggering but still believes—can you believe it?!—into the final victory of Communism... Innocence itself...Though you never can tell...Who knows?. After all, they still keep Lenin's mummy in the Mausoleum... Imagine the unthinkable technologies they so possibly will have in that frigging future, eh? After so dreadfully advanced in medical science they'll reassemble the guy from just his boot strings, you know… but what then? To storm the Winter Palace anew? It's a museum now. And no Royal Romanov to revenge for his hanged brother...

Then and there we stipulated that after Fyodor and Yasha got their diplomas, at their farewell party I would ramble into the Oster waters with a glass of champagne aloft in my hand. Like in the movie "The Land of Sannikov" the Czarist army lieutenant enters the rolling surf after the schooner sailing away to discoveries.

"There is a point between the past and the future,

And that split second is what we call life..."

And then we, happily mushy, got up and made for the Hosty overtaking the lazy bottles still sticking from the middle of the river.

(...we lived in the era of stagnation only we did not know yet about it...)

In the blue-tiled shower on the Hosty's first floor, I made a discovery that I had a rather resonant voice. So I brought my guitar from Konotop and sang from the window of my room on the third floor to serenade no one in particular.

Of course, Irina from Bakhmuch notified the whole pack of Artemises at the English Department that I was not a kosher game. As a result, the uniform sweet sadness in the eyes of girls gave way to the expression of alert vigilance, and my entering their rooms did not triggered an automatic invitation to have a tea-party any more. But all the same, I sang.

Sometimes students of the Music-Pedagogical Department descended from their fifth floor to knock on Room 72 door, requesting the guitar at least for one evening. Probably, they wanted to get some rest…

Moreover, end September, when our course students attended the wedding of a student mate in her native town of Borzna, I was strumming and singing there all night the numbers from the repertoire of The Orpheuses, The Orion, and Duke Ellington. And the folks danced to my music!. The slender bride in a long white dress, pressing herself to the massive figure of her groom, did not miss bestowing her grateful looks on the wedding singer. Her brother stood on

guard by the record player to shoo off those who wanted to start a disk. Not every wedding could boast of having live music…

~ ~ ~

At the beginning of October, I was summoned to the personnel department of the State Pedagogical Institute. The head of the personnel department, without looking into my face, urged me to pass on into the additional room behind his office desk, but he himself remained where he was.

In the adjacent room, there also was a desk with a lanky man at it who had a shaven face of about 40 years old and pale-dark hair of indistinct length. After my entering and getting seated, he clasped the fingers of his long hands on top of the desk and introduced himself as a Captain of the Committee of State Security, aka the KGB, and went over to briefing me that to prevent the espionage activities of the CIA agents coming to our land under the disguise of news correspondents the KGB needed young people who spoke English. Such people were to get the appropriate special training and be subsequently sent to foreign countries to ensure the security of our state.

Wow! Wild dreams did come true without ever turning to the precinct militiaman Solovey! Captain of KGB was in person making me an offer that I wouldn't even try to refuse. Not for nothing in my adolescent dreams, I was trying on the shirt of Banionis from "The Dead Season"! It only remained to discuss the details... When after the classes on my way to the hostel I see him with a newspaper in his hands, then an hour later I need to call this here number to get further instructions. And at that, we parted…

A week later, when I called him with the payphone fixed in the glass-walled cage by the second, permanently locked, entrance door to the hostel lobby, he instructed me to come to the railway station, and there proceed to the wooden house of the station militia, next to the public toilet, and enter the first door to the right in their corridor... Behind that door, under his dictation, I wrote the application to enlist me in the secret contingent of the KGB, to which end I chose the conspirative by-name "Pavel" as my operational pseudonym...

At our third meeting, Captain said that the response from the commanding staff at the military detachment of my army service indicated they were of extremely poor opinion about me. Like, I was a hopelessly lost and utterly spoiled fraction of the society dregs.

> (...it seems like at the KGB everything was turned upside down – first, they recruited me as a secret agent and then waked up to collecting information if I was worth the while.
>
> Though on the second thought, there could also be my fault, to some extent, by presenting myself so awesome good guy in the forged testimonial.
>
> To quote the great sage Gavkalov, in charge of a truck crane at SMP-615 (of whom later on), "what is all too good is not good at all"...)

So, I asked if Zampolit reported of me as an accomplice in a bank robbery, to which Captain grinned but all the same wished to know why the commanding officer was so negative in his estimation.

Well, I didn't attempt at jejune justifications or puerile lies, nothing of the sort. I told him the whole truth about how it all happened. It's only that I substituted myself for the projectionist at the construction battalion club and part-time postman collecting daily mail for the battalion personnel from the city main post office, whom Zampolit trusted with running errands and passing presents to his (Zampolit's) young passions.

By the adjusted version, it was I who accidentally laid up one of the girls who was silly enough to blab it before Zampolit and now, in his jealous fury, he besmeared me with the stamp of a drug-using rowdy...

After that talk, the halo of my dream of becoming a spy on the USA soil grew dim. It dawned on me that I might have been needed for only local use, in the capacity of a snitch, another "Gestapo's ear inserted into Everyman's pocket".

The future confirmed my gloomy boding... There were no more talks about intelligence service school (which bullshit served to hook the fool) instead, twice a month, I came to the room in the station militia corridor to report that I hadn't heard any political discussions among the students of the NGPI.

On the one hand, I felt guilty for letting Captain down and the hopes he pinned on me, but on the other – what could I report? Was the KGB really interested that Igor Recoon, both a Konotoper and my course-mate who entered the institute straight from school, fell in love with the fourth-year student Olga Zhidova from Chernigov?.

All his evenings Igor spent in her room while her roommates exploited the feelings of the young enamored, sending him with a kettle after water from a tap in the washroom.

Once he was checked on the way by my roommate, the fourth-year student Marc Novoselytsky. "Made an errand-boy of you, eh?" asked Marc with his usual mocking grin.

"So what?" the yesterday's schoolboy did not give in, but defiantly threw up his sharp schnozzle with the tea-colored glasses on it and kept chewing, in the attitude of a big-time indie dude, his bubble gum.

"In love with Olga Zhidova, eh?"

"So what?"

"Wanna marry her, eh?"

"So what?"

"How can you marry her? She was my lay!"

"So what?"

The youth withstood even that deadly blow, yet the treacherous kettle slightly lowered its spout in his slackened hand, letting thread-thin trickle onto the gray concrete floor. Poor boy…

My roommate did not lie, of course, and he explained his action as a good-will wish to save young Igor from a fatal blunder. Yet all the same, that Novoselytsky was an ornery bastard, notwithstanding his being a Jew…

In short, I had nothing to curry favor with the KGB and mend my reputation ruined by the finking Zampolit.

> (...still and all, if only they ignored what he had rolled on me, and if they winked at the baptizing of my daughter, as well as being so rude to the unknown KGB officer at the foot of Komsomol Gorka Hill in the Stavropol city, then—you never can tell—I might have easily risen to the presidency in present Russia, even without a spy school... My mother always said that I was mighty clever.
>
> As it is, I poisoned my student years with my own hands. Seeing Captain twice a month excruciated me like an incurable toothache. However hard tried I to suppress the thoughts of a pending meeting and think of something...anything else...they returned to beset me like the thoughts of the inescapable end keep coming back to the terminally ill.
>
> Midst the heated revelries in the young-Lomonosov style, there'd pop up a sudden thought that in three days I was to go to a hateful interview which broke me out from the current merriment and made me switch over to morose ruminations that "seccol", aka secsot, which was just an abbreviation of "secret collaborator", sounded much more disgusting than *chmo*.
>
> And there was no escape – they had my application and reports telling on no one in particular but signed "Pavel". So even if I, say, got to Zona, another "zampolit" would approach me and order to keep on knocking on the inmates if I had no wish of a certain part from the KGB archives to be leaked to the resident master-thief, aka Zona's *pakhan*.
>
> My life got screwed and cramped up like that of Sindbad the Seaman when in some of his travels a nasty old man nestled around his neck strangling and kicking with his legs for the slightest disobedience.
>
> But why the KGB Captain remained nameless? He told me his name-and-patronymic but I am hanged if I can recollect it.

Not that I'm afraid of the KGB, or whatever is its new, post-Soviet, name – no; it's just a case of permanent brain cramp at that point. When I try to recollect, his name eludes me... Not that I strive in earnest though...)

~ ~ ~

In those times, there were two restaurants in Nezhyn – "Polissya" in the square in front of the Bazaar, and "The Seagull" in the hotel of the same name to the right from the City-and-District Party Committee behind the Lenin's back on the main square. The third one was on the first floor of the railway station but in the afternoon it worked as a canteen, so I count it out.

The epic provincial backwaters inspiring tender sympathy by a mere thought of it… of the monument bust commemorating the home-geezer whose sail-boat at the dawn of XIX-nth century hove at sight nearby the Antarctic shores, yet the silly innocent penguins couldn't discern the entire taxidermic impact of the appearance of that strange wooden ice-floe over the dark polar waters carrying a herd of strange penguins gaggling in non-Penguin lingo... of the cathedral closed for renovation works ever since end 50's... of the firstborn of the Soviet combat-tank industry, the model of 1929, at the Shevchenko Park entrance without any podium, right on the asphalt sidewalk: fill in the diesel fuel and – full ahead!. Even the square before the Bazaar was, actually, just a wide street tilting from the bridge up to the department store...

The restaurants we visited quite seldom, and not all of us because Yasha and Fyodor shunned the facilities. On such occasions, they were substituted by Sveta, the official bride of Marc. The white tablecloths on the tables, and the wide green runner from the entrance up to the screen in the corner, concealing the window to the kitchen, showed at once that it was a restaurant for you and not a shabby bar. And, as it's appropriate for a restaurant, we had to wait thru a long wait before the waitress would bring the ordered goulash and potatoes.

To whittle the span down, Sasha Ostrolootsky would start rubbing his set of spoon-fork-knife lined in a close formation next to the up-turned cone of a napkin upon the tablecloth. Like, he was so well-bred and cleanly. Good news, he didn't stick his pinky finger out at the procedure, some prudish Marquis de Orphanage...

Sveta kept nagging Marc with her "What's that, Marik? I didn't get it!" but in a lower kind of voice... Finally, from behind the screen, the waitress appeared with a tray in her hands... Whoops, taken to another table…

But here, at last, and for us too. She moved the plates from the tray onto the table. Sasha in a well-trained manner poured shots of vodka out from the small and round, like a flask for Chemistry experiments, decanter. Shoot off!

And after the second shot, you were already a participant in a witty conversation of the amicable table-mates. Your fingers toyed so smartly with the fork. The music from the loudspeakers behind the screen was no longer sounding too crude. Your unobtrusively gaze swept over those present in the room. Which one to invite for a slow dance on the green runner?

Marc knew them all, which Department, say, those two girls were from, and in what year of their study. If that was someone not from the Institute, then Sveta, as a local guide, presented all their intimate details. Weren't we the cream of the libertine crop then, eh?.

In the end, Marc would pay for all from his soft brown purse. Back at the hostel, we reimbursed for our shares…

But for his love to teach you, Marc would pass for quite a decent dude. Coming back from the shower on the first floor, he made sure to peep into the lobby to thank the watchwoman, auntie Dinna, for the hot water. And then he started to drive it home to me that although she had nothing to do with the water, yet now she was prepared to do him favors. Because it's like promising something to someone. Nobody might be positive if you were going to keep your word so that they would get indeed what was promised, however, the person you bestowed a hope on starts looking into your hands and, because of the anticipation, they would pull for you.

> (...it seems to me, he was just echoing adages by which his father kept screwing his head on since Marc's early childhood. Jewish wisdom transferred from generation to generation, eh?.
>
> That's from whom the KGB learned hooking fools by promises of a spy school...)

Paying for his free lectures in kind, I presented him *The Otranto Castle* which book he saw on my cabinet-box and got impressed.

It was borrowed from the library at the KahPehVehRrZeh Club. So, I had to return the book first and a week later I stole it from the shelves. Nothing could be easier, in the privacy of a passage between the stacks of shelves, you stuck a book under the belt in your pants, put your sheepskin coat aright, grab another book on the way to the desk of the librarian, and leave with two books of which only one is registered….

The home-made feasts whooped up in Room 72 cost us much less... While Yasha and Fyodor were dispatched after Calvados in flask-like bottles of foreign looks, Ostrolootsky and I went to the kitchen.

On each floor in the Hosty, there were two kitchens, located by the entrance to the corridor from each of the staircase landings. Each kitchen was furnished with two gas stoves, one water tap combined with the sink, and three rows of boxes on one wall, like those in automatic storage cells, only made of veneered chipwood instead of iron... On the window sill, we were peeling potatoes, lots of potatoes.

Sasha had nice sporty looks in his jacket whose zipper was always swayed up to the utmost with the slider tastefully dangling from under his chin. "Well, that'll do. Let's chop them...Okay...Come up to the door, just lean against it. Yes, that's the way...Now, let's check what we have here..."

Ostrolootsky opened a box door and unloaded a piece of butter onto the huge frying pan, "Oh, and here some nice onions too, excellent!." He frisked thru the boxes with such elegant ease that I did not immediately realize that we were robbing the provision, aka "torbas", of the girls from our Department. All went so deftly and smoothly, the tongue wouldn't turn to call it looting.

> (...well, while Sasha might be justified by his half-starved childhood in an orphanage, what about me? How would I look into Robin Hood's noble eyes after that wicked depredation?
>
> And yet (with all the remorse in its place) I haven't ever eaten anything as delicious as that potatoes fried on pillaged butter...
>
> However, Calvados turned out to be a lousy swill. And even quenching the hangover by it was disgusting...)

Zhora Ilchenko came back from India after working at the Soviet embassy there for a year or so. One should be a hard-working student to grasp enough of English for the job in just one academic year at the English Department of NGPI, or there cropped up some other reasons which I did not care to consider. Anyway, Zhora Ilchenko came back to finish the studies and get his diploma together with the rest of the students who he had started his learning with.

I did not know Zhora and only saw him from afar in the Old Building corridors. He had a crisp, rapidly thinning black hair and a mustache emphasizing the red of his lips.

Needless to say, that I envied him – one whole year in India!. From his detour, he brought some books in English and those commenced circulating among the students at our Department and when my course-mate Igor Recoon made friends with Zhora, I borrowed from Igor a book which he borrowed from Zhora. It was a volume of short stories by William Somersault Maugham published at the Penguin Publishing House. The book was difficult to read because of lots of nebulous and tricky words. I had to borrow *The Large English-Russian Dictionary* from Natasha Zhaba, my group-mate...

Reading the book borrowed from Igor, borrowed from Zhora, I came across a really short story (some two-and-a-half pages) named *The Man with a Scar*, and its size tempted me to try my hand at translating the story into Russian. Moreover, there was a place for publishing – on the third floor of the Old Building next to the Language Laboratory, there hung the wall newspaper *Translator*, a sheet of Whatman with neatly glue-mounted rows of typewritten pages of translations made by the students of the English Department, alongside with the Classes Time-Table for all the four courses...

Besides being so conveniently short, the story highlighted the very essence of all those Latin American revolutionaries. The to-do list for such a revolutionary was not too complicated – to adorn oneself with the rank of Colonel or General, rally a gang, and start a war for liberation under the slogan "Liberty or Death!" until he became the dictator.

However, the would-be dictator from the story ran out of ammunition and got captured before he reached his goal. At the dawn on his execution day, he for a moment stepped aside from his gang lined up against the wall for the pending procedure and hugged his beloved who came running up to him to say goodbye, get a soul kiss, and be stabbed to death. Because they loved each other so much. *Alma de mi corazon!*

The current dictator, present at the execution, was impressed by such a poignant passion, ordered to single his rival out and after the firing squad did their job on the rest of the gang, they deported the man to a nearby Latin American State where his following career was that of a drunkard jackalling at bars under the pretext of selling lottery tickets... Once a bottle of beer burst in his hands and a glass splinter nicked his face, that's how he became the man with a scar.

Just so simple a story without superfluous frills. However, Maugham knows the way to present concise but tangible details in his stories. He is some real writer that son of.. er.. the foggy Albion.

> (...the words in English are short, except for those borrowed from other languages, and a sentence made of them looks like a handful of scattered rice, yet sometimes it might contain a whale of meanings, enough to fill a whole sack.
>
> In Russian, on the contrary, the words, because of their suffixes and prefixes, are long like spaghetti, or cobweb threads of which you have to weave what, actually, you were about...)

The wall newspaper *Translator* was supervised and edited by the teacher of theoretical grammar or something like that, studied at the senior courses of the English Department. Alexander Vasilyevich Zhomnir. A capital man.

> (...nowadays such an individual would be referred to as a regular screwball, but then it meant a dissident they hadn't run down yet...)

Outwardly, he sooner had looks of a Ukrainian nationalist than of a dissident, but also too cunning to be caught, otherwise, they'd never allow him to teach at an institute. His long gray hair he combed back for it to immediately return to bangs over his broad forehead and touch his gray bushy brows. The shoulders were somewhat arched as if prepared to receive a weighty sack upon them, and in his movements there was the touch of clumsiness which takes decades of cultivation. Just a villager beekeeper for you or, say, a miller who had bored all the way up into professorate of linguistic neurosurgery... To the institute, he was coming by his bicycle, like a mujik, yet intellectually buckled it down with a padlock threaded thru the spokes when leaving his means of transportation leaned against a Birch tree.

When in the wide corridor by the Language Laboratory, I handed Zhomnir a thin copybook with my translation of the Maugham's story, he flipped thru it and with overly exact articulation of Russian words, stated that he did not work with texts in Russian, for which reason *Translator* presented students' works in only Ukrainian except for the translations of poetic pieces…

Right, in my school certificate the Ukrainian Language and Literature were marked with "n/c" – "not certified", thanks to arriving to Konotop past half of my school-time which legally allowed ditching Ukrainian Language classes while the younger came too early to also evade it. Nonetheless, in a fortnight after moving to Konotop I was reading books in Ukrainian as well, so in two weeks I surprised Zhomnir with a Ukrainian version of that same man with a scar.

He bucked up and, with a glint of satisfaction in his eyes, smashed and crushed my labors to the finest dust.

I hated being flogged like that, yet I couldn't but see that he was right. Nonetheless, to simply ditch the whole venture was out of the question, not only because of wounded pride but also of getting hooked by wrestling obstinate Slavonic words and making them express what I was able to grasp from among the rolling beads of Maugham's language. The struggle was so exciting that I took the guitar back to Konotop…

~ ~ ~

The rumors I became aware of one year later, that arriving in Konotop on Saturdays I dropped my black plastic "diplomat" in the hallway and started off to whores, without ever caring a fig that, while I was away, my wife got laid promiscuously, readily and regularly, was a gross exaggeration. My relations with Olga remained steady, passionate and invariably brought a feeling of deep satisfaction. Except for that occasion when I staged timing...

My roommate Marc Novoselytsky, for no obvious reason, asked me about the duration of my having a sex with my wife. Caught unawares, I made a wild guess at modest ten to fifteen minutes, no longer. He mocked so tall a tale exceeding any limits of the humanly possible and we bet…

Olga did not get it when I put onto the bedroom windowsill the alarm clock normally stationed in the kitchen, and I did care to clarify the news... With the clock's clacking on my brain, the shown results were a total debacle...

On Sunday night arriving back to the Hosty, I honestly admitted it had taken a niggardly five minutes, which report turned Marc's usual smirk into a happy smile... But all of the other times it was all right and time did lose all meaning whatsoever.

Before it, we were visiting Loony and danced slow dances there with a sincere feeling, and we gave free rein to our vigor in the fast ones. She was good at it, in any style. In the meantime, we watched a couple of fights on the floor, which Lyalka dubbed 'gladiatorial bull-battles' or took a respite out of the hall, in the unlit corridor of the library wing.

There, leaning our backs against the windowsill beneath the silent dark-black panes, Lyalka and I shared a joint immersing into more and more deep comprehension of the aquarium essence of the interior around, while Olga was smoking her orange-filtered cigarettes. Everything turned *nyshtyak* and the thoughts about my being a KGB rat in Nezhyn sank to the very bottom of the aquarium…

My matrimonial duties I performed rather accurately, so when Olga said she was pregnant and the abortion regulations called for the husband to donor one glass of his blood in the hospital, I went there without much ado, though I had, like, always tried to keep protective at having it.

In the room for blood transfusions, I was shod in white shoe covers and laid on the table topped with a chilly oilcloth. There were two nurses in the room, and I was stunned by the expression about their eyes, or rather struck by the absence of any. Their eyes seemed being blanked with filmy blinds, like to the stilled gaze of dead fish.

With a needle on the end of a thin elastic tubing, they approached me and tried to stick it into the vein inside my arm to make the blood flow thru the hose. Yet, at all of their 3 attempts at piercing the vein, it stubbornly rolled away from the needle stubbed deep under the skin. Their bewilderment turned the dead-eyed nurses astoundingly merciful and they gave the needed confirmation ref that I had undergone the procedure as stipulated by the respective HealthCare regulations. Streamlined, out-worldly, as any other piece of paper from any other state affiliated institution or boghole...

> (...tell you what, guys? Them those organs feeding them those officials since long invented their special dialect to pump snooty mist in the simplest things while all that's needed, "unattended fucking, fine—250 ml of blood". Period. And all those mildewed vampires wilt and wither from black envy in their frowzy twilights...)

The surrender was unthinkable and simply impossible. So, I had to learn one more writing—similar to Arabic lettering only with a wider sweep—the hand of Zhomnir with which he scribbled his notes over and between the lines of the manuscripts I kept handing to him. At last, he raised a bushy brow and said that it seemed somewhat like that already, and my translation would go for the next issue of *Translator*.

Then there came the day when Yasha and Fyodor, standing in front of the typewritten pages pasted in the Whatman sheet on the wall, congratulated Zhomnir with the fresh discover of an upstart talent in the field of Ukrainian translations with such an unmistakably Ukrainian ending in his family name – Ogolts-OFF. Zhomnir responded more directly – he was not to blame that so truly-truly Ukrainians as Demyan-KO and Velich-KO had never scratched their ass in all four years of their studying at the English Department….

Spring came hand in hand with the most cloudless and unalloyed love of my life. Everyone both addressed and referred to her as Shvydcha, but I called her by her name – Nadya. It was her to bring about the resurrection of my belief that true female principle was still and all alive in this civilization-jizzed world... We loved each other, love was filling us to brims and trickling over. Love for love's sake is a lovable love, it's the purest form of love, if you love it.

Why am I stating for both of us? By what right do I use so unrestrained allegations? The answer is very simple – Nadya was a virgin, innocent and inexperienced, as yet, in faking.

Then, maybe, I once again forgot to warn that I was married? The fact needed no advertising, she was finishing her fourth year at the English Department and lived on the Anglo-Fac floor in the Hosty. Some unique combination: virginity and the fourth course at the Anglo-Fac, eh?

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy..."

The fourth-year male students held a banquet in their pencil-box room opposite ours, to which I also was called. Nadya happened to be sitting next to me on the same bed and, when someone turned off the light in the room, I reflexively unzipped her sports jacket. She flicked it back right away and when they turned the light on, everything was the innocence itself and no need to call the police morale. However, Marc had read the zipper sounds in the dark, and he began to chaff. Nadya got hurt and left, and all was over.

The following day she met me in the long murky corridor on our floor, dressed in the same sportswear, spoke up to me, and smiled. Oh, the smile of Nadya was a real thing! Those dimples in the cheeks, those impish sparks in her eyes!

She fitted all the canons of a Ukrainian beauty – glossy stream of black hair down to the middle of her back, round face with velvety black rainbows of eyebrows over the shiny dark-brown eyes, voluminous breasts, rounded shoulders smoothly flowing into the arms and hands set akimbo on her abundant hips above the gorgeous thighs of a trained swimmer. Because she was going in for that sport.

And, with all that, what did she need me for? Well, here a simple answer again – that summer she was going to get married. Not to me, betcha, there was some lieutenant graduating some military school who would marry and take her to the garrison of his appointment.

There was not much time left, and we did not want to squander it away. We loved to love each other and we wanted more and more of it. But that came later because, at first, we had to tackle busting her cherry…

The initial couple of dates we spent in the narrow compartment with one window and one sink, partitioned, for some reason, from the rest of sinks and taps in the washroom. The truly spartan style of the tight interior did not matter much at the introductory stages of acquainting ourselves with each other, especially since the latch-lacking door of it was easy to block.

And then the guys from Room 71 left for a day or two, leaving their key to Zhora Ilchenko. He, actually, rented some place in the city but who would reject the key from a vacant room in the Hosty? They did not pass the key to him from hand to hand though, just hung it on its nail in the plywood shield behind the watchwomen's desk in the lobby. It's hard to trace back in what way that information reached me, but I did not wait for another invitation to such a gift of fate and snatched the key before Zhora.

In the evening, Nadya and I retired to Room 71 and locked the door... When the knocking on the door ceased, and the echoes of Zhora's cries, "Anyone seen Ogoltsoff?!" died away in the long corridor outside, Nadya started to gradually take off the items of her sportswear, accompanying the striptease of the stagnation era with a chant from the pre-war black-and-white movie "The Circus",

"Tiki-tiki-do, ay!

I'm leaving from the cannon to the sky!."

Although she was noticeably ill at ease... We lay down on the bed by the window. On the other side of the double partition made of gypsum slabs was my Room 72. By the window, there stood Fyodor's bed under the wall socket which was not properly fixed in its place and kept falling out when disturbed by the plug of a cassette tape-recorder.

Nadya's scream from the socket attracted Fyodor's attention. He took it out altogether and till late at night was listening to the moans that followed. We were not aware of being tapped, though even knowing it wouldn't tell on our enthusiasm...

The following day, the guys from Room 71 returned and wanted the key back… On Monday, at the date in the washroom, Nadya was gloomy, silent, yet I managed to bring the reason out: Marc Novoselytsky was spilling dirty gossip among the fourth-year students that Ogoltsoff had had Shvydcha in the washroom from the back... I always sensed he was not indifferent to her, otherwise, why should he be so attentive to the zipper zips at that birthday? O, you'll catch it, Jewish bastard!.

On Tuesday, he returned from the shower, his hair freshly moist, the towel hanging over his shoulder, to find only me in Room 72. I locked the door, let the key slide into my hip-pocket, and announced, "Take off your glasses, Marc. I'll beat you up." He did not remove the glasses though but instead began to run around the brown table with the chairs placed deeply under it. I had to push the table to the window exterminating space for him to go on orbiting that weary piece of furniture.

In the nook between the windowsill, the bed, and the table, he stood with his head bowed like Andriy, the son of Taras Bulba – a lamb resigned himself to being sacrificed. I hit him on the chin so as not to damage the glasses, and in a pitched-up tone of voice promised that if he, fucking motherfucker, would ever squeal a single word about Shvydcha... When I finished my Sermon on the Mount, he set his glasses aright and said with a toady smile, "You so fucking well kicked up my fucking ass, right?"

(...the wisdom of ages imbibed with the mother's milk.

And—what is characteristic—he on the fly picked up my sermon phraseology. Affinity with languages resides in their blood...)

On Thursday, at the end of our date in the compartment, she pensively observed, "Yet, he was right after all..." It stunned me that I was like fulfilling the plans laid down by Marc Novoselytsky. Some fucking Nathan the Prophet… But where was the way out?.

The manna from heaven came in the form of a first-year student at the Mus-Ped. In his angel-like curls, golden gloss in his glasses' rim, he descended from above—the firmament of the fifth floor—to our sinful third floor and handed me the key to a vacant room in the corridor up there. Hallelujah!

But why? After all, I did not ask him nor anyone else, and I did not even suspect that room existed. How could he possibly know?!. Yes, a couple of times I gave him my guitar last autumn, but since then we had not even met...

> (....in those irrevocably faraway times—past any reach, recall, redress—I hadn't realized yet that all my...
>
> — COULD YOU FUCKING SHUT UP IN THAT YOUR FUCKING SLEEPING BAG?!.)

And that was it. The key in hand switched me and Nadya to the nocturnal way of life, we were ascending to the fifth floor when the student life gradually subsided in the Hosty's benighted corridors and we were coming down back in the mum gray of the pre-dawn dusk.

She once again became a freshman student, sort of. When our course was on the training excursion to Kiev, where we rode a bus for foreign tourists, she also joined in. The young guide on that bus spoke only English, "Look to your left!. Look to your right!." Concluding the tour, he asked if we had any questions.

By that time, I got so used to being a foreign tourist that also asked in English, "Are you a Communist, Mr. Guide?"

Taken aback by so out-of-the-blue question from a local student, he still managed to answer, "I am a Candidate for the Communist Party Membership."

"Okay, I see, Comrade Guide."

Then Nadya and I were sitting on a bench in a green patch of one of those steep lanes descending to Khreshchatyk Street. The sun was shining from the sky with fluffy clouds floating around it without screening the tender warmth. Nadya and I were kissing long kisses. Next to me there sat Igor Recoon and gravely scattered bits of cookies to the pigeon flock of a different feather, noisily crowding on the asphalt about our feet. Hopefully, Kiev felt on that day that it was another—albeit small—Paris...

~ ~ ~

(...why was it so irksome to be a secsot? I did not tell on anybody, making the KGB man shake his head at my reports empty of useful information. Still, the feeling of being hooked and squeezed with the ratchet from which there was no way out, and the constant fear that my finking would get exposed, remained the source of ever-present internal torment – an unwilling rat is still a rat.

On the other hand, I, sort of, felt guilty before Captain. Especially, after my turning down his request in winter...)

Captain asked me then to sell my sheepskin coat for him to wear when a-hunting. The short coat of shaggy black sheepskin, my father's coat still from the easy times at the Object. The sheepskin which Olga and I were sitting on at our wedding party. It was a part of my image, converging with the plastic black "diplomat" briefcase and my nigh-tabooed warcry whenever having a situation, "Stuff it! We'll prick the hooey!"

To sell that sheepskin coat was kinda selling a part of me. I did not tell Captain all that, I only answered that I couldn't. He didn't insist though; that might have also been a test, sort of, if I was ready to sell myself.

But in May I pleased him in full. At last, he got a fat reward for all my empty reports written under his dictation that nothing worthy of attention had happened or heard about. Yes, twice a month he was dictating for me to write them so that the sheets of paper by my hand, signed "Pavel", accumulated in his safe, to get me ever deeper run thru with their hook…

So, end May, returning from the weekend, Marc entered the room bubbling with delight about a new game he'd just learned in Kiev. "The Game of Parties" was its name and all of us should have a try to see how interesting it was.

Fyodor and I took a break in Throw-in Fool played on Fyodor's bed. Ostrolootsky sat down on his and leaned the back of his head against the soiled spot in the wallpaper, and all of us listened to the rules.

The objective was to re-model the events of history process at our will. Starting from the summer of 1917, the period before the single-party political system got consolidated, when there still were all sorts of Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Social-Revolutionaries, Anarchists and so on, each player had to choose a party to their liking and win the other players, move them joining their side. Try and see for yourselves what great fun it is!.

In the Hosty, Room 72 enjoyed no less popularity than a public urinal next to a cheap beer bar and everyone, who happened to drop in on that night, was met with Marc's gleeful giggling and the offer to partake in so breath-taking role-playing game. For the start, he together with Ilya Lipes and Ostrolootsky united into the Bund, on the basis of their shared nationality, but then they split and joined the Mensheviks and the Social Democrats.

Sasha Nesteryouk, on a flying visit thru the room, waved his black scarf playfully and proclaimed anarchy to be the mother of order.

Fyodor and I declared ourselves fighters from the Peasant Army of Nestor Makhno and threatened to fuck up anyone distracting us from playing Throw-in Fool. Yasha, as a resident of Poltava, became a representative of the Ukrainian Central Rada. The horseplay was not too long but as loud as usual…

Next morning, no one remembered the noisy pastime and would forget it altogether were I not so stupid as to mention the jolly game at the meeting with the KGB man. Captain got wired, sat upright and, instead of usual two lines, squeezed out of me a whole page with the names of who was in the room, which party was his choice.

He did not like the conclusion in my report that the game died out because we got bored; I had to re-write all after he edited the page and crossed the statement out... And the hell of a rumpus broke loose.

The KGB started calling the guys from the English Department for interrogations, even those who never popped up in Room 72 that cursed night. They wrote down their testimonies – who entered second? who sat where? why declared himself a Kadet? Some students were summoned more than once. Dudes were coming back to the hostel with drawn faces, retelling the interrogation, anxiously discussing the possible outcome. Under the single-party political system, you could very easily be denied the diploma even after four years of study…

Three weeks later there was a general meeting of the English Department because the Organs detected certain unhealthy tendencies among our students. The KGB captain was introduced to the meeting and read out the list of the participants in the subversive Game of Parties. It eased me up a little when I heard my name mentioned – they wouldn't guess that it was I who finked on guys. Then they began to selectively call the players to the large blackboard in the auditorium.

Lipes said that he dropped in absolutely by chance, seeking a teapot, stayed for just a minute and did not have time enough to get it what game it was at all.

Sehrguey Nesterenko from Kiev, without any preliminaries, banged off a dramatic declamation of the lines in a Shakespeare play:

"Romans! Countrymen! Lend me your ears!.."

He was called to stop the balagan and get back to his place immediately.

As for Yasha Demyanko, he felt obviously happy to lean onto the lectern with his elbows and begin developing logical syllogisms in the most flowery Ukrainian language about the unprecedented precedent at hand.

In the end, Marc Novoselytsky faced the meeting, as the instigator, and said how sorry he was for not getting it at once how bad that game was, and promised solemnly to never ever play it again. The meeting decided to announce a reprimand to everyone from the Captain's list and called to always guard and uphold the honor of the Soviet youth...

Returning to the hostel from the meeting, everyone seemed to give me sidelong glances and whisper behind my back.

Sasha Ostrolootsky, to relieve the stress from the interrogations in the KGB, drank a bottle of vodka without any snack and had to throw up, however, he managed to run out to the toilet.

Everyone finished the studies and received their diplomas. The KGB Captain failed to bloat the Game of Parties up to the dimensions of the "doctors-poisoners" case about their attempt at assassination of Leader of All Nations, Comrade Stalin, with their medical treatment. However, he certainly proved to his seniors that not for nothing his salary was paid to him...

> (...and I am still thinking that it was not for nothing that Gray came to the battalion stoker-house to beat me up for ratting. It’s only that he anticipated the events and came ahead of time...)

The first time that thought came to me at the concluding meeting with Captain in the current academic year. He handed over twenty rubles and told me to sign the receipt that I got the money for secret collaboration. Damn! It was not silver coins and the sum didn't coincide with that paid to Judas, yet the rubles burnt my hands urging to get to Konotop as soon as possible and use up all of it for ganja right away... That failed to restore my peace of mind. I rode the footstep of Streetcar 3, looking at my reflection in the glass of folded door (I always liked the way it reflected me) and hated that face in the glass. Why have I ruined my own life?.

~ ~ ~

Between the New Building and the Hosty, there was a rather wide ditch for draining of excess water from the Count's Park lake into the Oster. We walked together—Nadya, I and Igor Recoon—bypassing, for some reason, the New Building from behind, when I noticed an iron pipe connecting the banks of the ditch. It sagged about a meter above the surface of still water overgrown with duckweed.

"I dare me to go over!" said I.

Nadya screamed, "No! Don't dare!"

And Igor immediately said, “I bet you won't!"

The pipe was not wide (cross-section 10 cm) and, half-way over the ditch, it teetered under my feet. With Nadya's "ah!" and "oh!" behind my back, I regained a feeble balance and, fluttering my arms, advanced for another couple of meters and spurted the final segment.

"Aha!" shouted I and looked back.

Igor waved me from the other bank, "I dare you to return!"

Some viper of a homie, eh? I'm the Ogoltsoff but not just limitless so...

And why did I start all that at all? Because of the darn masculine pride. The day before, our course had a picnic by the Oster, almost outside the city. There Nadya challenged me to compete in swimming, one hundred meters down the river.

She went ahead at once and after another twenty meters, I realized that my Kandeebynno-made freestyle swimming was but a garbage in comparison to her powerful butterfly. What could I do? I climbed onto the bank and was the first to reach the finish line where I met the winner with a bunch of flowers grabbed in the grass along the way, "You're the champion, Nadya!"

When the 3 of us (Fyodor, Yasha and I) came with a load of bottles under the canopy of giant Elms in the Count's Park and lay down in the grass to have a drink accompanied by the rustle in the green sway of foliage overhead, Yasha asked if I really had chosen the career of a circus pipe walker. I was surprised because he had not been there, but Fyodor said that the whole English Department knew already about my crossing the ditch.

We drank and Fyodor began to complain of Pro-Rector Budowski who viciously, on purpose, spoiled Fyodor's entire Grade Book that registered results of credits and examination past in all four years of his study. The grades in there were uniform "threes" but that bitch Budowski put him "four" in spite of Fyodor's earnest plea not to do so.

In this regard, Yasha put his index finger upright to draw a philosophical conclusion, that Fyodor "had swum hell of a way before he drowned nearby the shore".

We drank again and, inspired by the bright warm day, I said that pipe-walking was a baby toy because I could climb even that Elm whose wide trunk was clean of branches to grip at and forked about eight meters above the ground.

Yasha once again set his philosophical finger up and instructively declared the undertaking beyond the humanly possible, yet he was prepared to buy two bottles of wine if he see me waving my hand from the tree crown.

I somewhat cheated at the bet because behind the Elm there grew a thinner tree you could shin up and then move over into the crotch of the giant. That way, I climbed to the mentioned altitude and safely returned to the native terra firma. Yet, Yasha began to cavil and announced my exploit a measly wangling, but Fyodor, who he appealed to for an arbitration, gave out a peremptory command to shut up with petty quibbling – the point stipulated had been reached and two bottles from Yasha were due on the barrel head...

Returning to the Hosty after our recreation, I showed them the pipe over the ditch – the training kit for aspirant pipe-walkers. Yasha grew passionate and proclaimed such crossing but a trifle, and he would easily prove it for merely two bottles of wine if I would hold his pants. I could not refuse a senior student from my department, my coach at playing Preferans and Protracted Throw-in Fool…

And he stepped on the pipe and walked ahead, in his elegant white shirt with the grid of thin yellow and blue stripes, from under which lasted his long legs in socks and black shoes. He did not suspect how insidious the pipe was over the middle of the ditch... However, as it turned out, the depth there allowed for standing on the bottom.

When Yasha got back to us, the colors of the shirt clinging to his torso bore generous additions of slimy green. He had nothing to lose anymore and went for the second time, with a tantamount success though. My loud laughter motivated Fyodor and, to maintain the honor of the graduating course, he gave me his pants too and went over the shaky piece of iron. After plumping down he was smart enough to get out at the opposite bank of the ditch.

Damn it! I was splitting my sides with their pants in my hands. They might have done it, by the by, had they not surrendered beforehand by taking their pants off. Well, at least, the Hosty was not too far off and fourth-year students without their pants was not a too seldom sight there….

My laughter seemed to turn an ominous hoot. On the arrival in Konotop, I learned that my wife was missing; she went to work a day before and hadn't been seen ever since. My mother visited Olga's aunt who neither knew a thing... At the insistent advice of my mother, I dined before going to aunt Nina in the hope of some recent news.

She shook her head sadly, nothing whatsoever. Then I went to the brick factory. It was already dark and the electric bulbs shed their hazy yellowish light inside of the main workshop floor building. As it turned out, the Konotop brick factory didn't use a circle kiln, being equipped instead with trolley-trains going in and out the kiln gate over narrow-gauge rail tracks... It seemed to be a break, and on the entire workshop floor, I saw just one man and inquired him about Olga.

"Where should she be?" retorted he resentfully. "Whoring about the city." That moment I recognized him, it was the one she introduced me to by Deli 1 when I came back from the army. Had he remembered me? Hard to say...

I went out of the workshop floor into the night...whoring about... But, maybe she'd come to the third shift? I had nowhere to go anyway.

Climbing upon the unfinished wall in the nearby building under construction, I sat there like that owl who flew to me in my childhood at the Object, the messenger from the unknown... That's how I sat there, in the middle of night, thinking thoughts which were better be left alone and not thought at all, the thoughts that should be dropped down the road before their final completion for it did no good and there would come the moment of their critical mass going beyond the fail-safe point and—willy-nilly—you had to act already, regardless of how carefully the thoughts had been thought thru or else… but what to act?

A rectangle of yellow light sprang up in the darkness, a man came out of the workshop door and banged the light back into the dark. Soon, he opened it again, went in, and all again turned the dark night. Been out to take a leak. Nothing to do here. I go home…

The following day brought news. My sister said that Sasha Plaksin, handled Esa, who lived in Gogol Street, had seen Olga by the fishermen huts at the Seim river. He did not speak to her, yet saw there, for two days in a row.

With the exam in Latin on the following morning, I couldn't wait for further developments, the main thing she was alive and kicking, so I left for Nezhyn.

My proficiency in Latin Lupus evaluated with "four" after my preparatory action by the door to the auditorium where he examined our course. Sending mighty echoes along the whole corridor, I roared at the top of my lungs:

"Gaudeamus igitur!.."

The disappearance of my wife, followed by her popping up, in absentia, at the place I wouldn't like to think of further, was surely putting me off, but having started you couldn't but go on:

"Juvenes dum sumus!.."

Lupus jumped out of the door to make sure it was I who loved his Latin so loudly, and later, when I got seated in front of him at the examination desk, he acted like a skilled worker at a conveyor belt – opened my grade book, entered "four", closed it, handed back to me. Fare the well, O, Lingua Latina….

Right after the examination, I hurried to Konotop and my mother told me that Olga came home in the morning. Unaware of her mother-in-law's presence in the bedroom, she, first of all, rushed into the living-room towards the mirror in the wardrobe door. Standing in front of it, she unbuttoned her shirt to examine the hickeys on her chest.

...the owner's brand… everyone bears theirs, of this or that kind… for someone, it's the hieroglyphs nail-scarred on their wrist, another one gets adorned with a necklace of monkey bites on their breasts…

"I yelled at her and told to go back from where she came. She gathered her clothes and left. What now?"

I shrugged, "What can there be?"

"No way for her to get Lenochka," my mother said resolutely.

All that was so weighing down…

Olga came the next morning wearing a turtleneck. She said she was staying at aunt Nina's because my mother kicked her out. Then she poured forth a pack of lies about going to the Seim

with Sveta and spending time in the hut of uncle Kolya's friends. I advised her to spare her breath because we were to divorce anyway.

"And Lenochka?"

"She'll stay here."

Olga went over to threats about her taking her daughter to her mother in Theodosia. Then she said it was I who made her do it because of all my whores in Nezhyn of whom they were telling her everything but she just kept silent. And, yes, she went to the Seim, out of spite, but there was nothing there, and we could still put everything aright.

> (...in life, there is always a choice. You may dig a hole or you may not dig it...
>
> By filing for divorce, you affirm that you're a cuckold who takes retaliatory measures within the framework of the current moral code. Neglecting the move, you still remain a cuckold but only if you look at yourself thru the eyes of society or—but not everyone is up to that "or"—you become a hooey-pricker who does not care a fuck and lives for his/her own pleasure. The teeny nuance is that the true hooey-pricker does not see any insoluble dilemma about all that stuff – they just live for their pleasure all the time.
>
> I always had it good with Olga but a whole lot of centuries-old morals and codes of "honor" bulldozed me and I was faced with the choice: to become a cuckold or go over to the other league? Making a choice is always a tragedy – choosing one thing you lose the alternative...)

I never liked to choose, I preferred leaving tragedies to others – to fate or, maybe, chance and, at that point, Olga served a tossup coin for the purpose. I told her that all would be scratched out and forgotten if she fetched weed for just one joint by the end of the day. She left and returned already in the evening, fairly weary. She said she had walked the whole city but no one had no weed.

That was the cruel finger of fate, some chance empty suction. *Alea jacta est!*.

> (...were Olga lucky in providing the joint, then I, as a noble man of quality, would only have to keep my word. We would have started living on and now someone else would be composing this letter to you.
>
> And maybe no letter would be needed, with you having Dad and Mom, and stuff. After all, replacing just one, even the tiniest, detail harbors a host of other outcomes...
>
> If, say, you flick by time machine to Mesozoic and there you accidentally slap-kill one single mosquito then, returning back, you find yourself in an irreversibly changed future – yes, the same year when you had left, but you yourself do not conform to the contemporary standards. And there's no one to blame, you should have watched out better in what you were stepping in that Mesozoic past…

Just a single joint would give me back the family idyll with an ideal woman. She was not trading herself for money or some other assets, she cheated on me just for her personal pleasure. The eternal pattern of the most natural exchange of joys – you to me, and I to you.

The fact that she was exchanging with someone else did not tell on my having it good with her. Why did I so stupidly gave up what I wanted and was getting in full? The moral foundations of the society left me no other choice but to join the crowd of dumb-ass "seminarians"...)

She gave me a great blow job for a goodbye and asked to come the next day to Aunt Nina's for something important. And it was how, because of cruel chance, I became a cuckold...

(...for a long time I couldn't understand my dislike of Lermontov, but now I know – that's because of his lies. Lermontov lied from the very start, from his poem to Pushkin's death:

"...with the lead of a bullet in his chest, he drooped his head..."

Well, let's say this lie was caused by the ignorance of anatomy. A hussar is not a doctor, after all, and for him the loins, where, actually, the bullet hit, and the chest might be the same. Half-meter higher, half-meter lower, who cares?!.

But there is no way to excuse the following lie:

"...he rebelled against the society's morals..."

Pah! Stop kidding, Lermontov-boy. He did not rebel but, on the contrary, he most exactly followed the precepts of the society for such a case. With the utmost rigor and slavish loyalty, Pushkin kept to the rules. And if he himself did not dare disobey the moral code of the society then what can we, mere mortals, do in case of violation of marital fidelity but to file for divorce?.

However, one always looks for some or other way to justify their beloved.... What if Pushkin was not at all obeying the dictates of moral customs? What if he intentionally used them for his personal gains? What if the aging, weary, poet worn out by the excesses of poetical lifestyle, threw down the gantlet to the greenhorn French youth on a visit to Russia for a too close attention to his wife, just to simulate a Shakespearean Othello with the hidden agenda of getting killed at the pledged duel and passing away in style?

But the development of this hypothesis requires three doctoral degrees: that in gerontology as well as in psychology, and one more in philology. While having a much more urgent matter on my hands—the letter to my daughter—I'd rather flashback, from the Varanda river to Konotop...)

The next day at the aunt Nina's *khutta*, she and her aunt performed in duo what I had already heard from Olga solo, about a fresh start from a clean leaf. Then the aunt went to her work. Olga and I drank a glass of hooch each and for about an hour were killing each other all over the kitchen and the adjacent living room adorned by the upright piano.

After we dressed, Olga asked – what now? I replied that the question had been answered and, alas, not by me. She started to cry and said that she knew what to do next, some pills appeared in her palm which she began to swallow. I managed to wring the most of them, yet she still managed to consume some.

I rushed out of the *khutta*, ran along Budyonny Street and past the Plant Park to Bazaar where a payphone hung at the intersection. Luckily, the receiver was nor cut off yet, and it worked. I called the ambulance.

Probably, it's not every day they were called for a suicide attempt but their vehicle overtook me on my way back. When I came to aunt Nina's, Olga sat limply on a stool in the middle of the kitchen giving reluctant answers to the doctor and nurse in white coats. She had a large mug in her hands and on the floor by her feet there stood a big basin used at the stomach lavage.

The crisis was obviously over and I left without going into details. It was unlikely that she would take another try, and from my own experience, I knew that gastric lavage brings about a general reassessment of values and a fresher perspective on any situation...

Two days later, I was told that they had seen Olga boarding a train of Moscow direction with some kind of a black-haired guy. Most likely, that was the one she'd been cheating on with my active participation two days before…

~ ~ ~

In a week, I went to Nezhyn to the fourth-course graduation party keeping my promise to Nadya. The party was arranged in the hall of celebrations on the first floor of the canteen. Nadya was the most beautiful there, in a long dress made of light chiffon, like a bride at her wedding, only pink.

In the end, everyone went to the Oster bank behind the hostel to build a fire from the thick copybooks with lecture notes scribbled thru all their four years of study. Fyodor and Yasha did not add their share to the fire because I had never seen anything like a copybook near them, another reason was their absence from the party.

The full moon was shining, the bonfire kept devouring by its nationalistically yellow-and-blue flames the pages of once-upon-a-time so necessary notes. The former students stood gazing at the fire—each for themselves from now on—and in the dark tall grass around, the teacher of theoretical grammar wandered in circles. He was a dwarf, no taller than up to your waist, but they said he was very clever. One of the graduates, the ugliest of all and, as gossip had it, dull and rude, agreed to marry him so as not to go to a village to work off for her diploma. She was a villager herself so she knew exactly what she was losing by such her choice…

For our farewell wedding night with Nadya, we went up to her room where there even were blinds on the window. We had goodbyes, and slept a little, and woke up for new goodbyes in breaststroke, and dog paddle, and backstroke, and front crawl and freestyle... When the pale morning light began seeping thru the white blinds and she reached for giving the first blow job in her life, I wearily pulled back. Let at least something remain for her tomorrow's husband to be first at. All of us—the cuckoldry brethren—have to be generous to each other…

~ ~ ~

When a mujik has nothing to do, he finds hard labor for himself. The *khutta* at 13, Decemberists Street amply provided an inexhaustible source of what to fill your leisure time with, and my father harnessed me into the infrastructure reconstruction... Brick-paneling the earth-pit cellar under the kitchen, replacing the fence and the wicket, constructing a summer shower next to the shed, insulating the outhouse in the garden, paving walks by the brick so as not to wade in mud after each heavy rain. Mujik's summertime brims up with tasks and cares...

For breaks, I visited Lyalka. He lived by Peace Square on the second floor in a red-brick five-story block between the Peace movie theater and the Department Store, right above the ice-cream pavilion "Snowflake".

His father, in his youth, had a criminal record and, when reaching the venerable age, became an ideological inspirer of the following generations of thieves. Returning from Zona, they shared warm recollections about Lyalka's dad coming to the court in a jacket over a tank top to instruct them to keep their tail up when in Zona, bandying words with the judge and having to forcibly leave the room. I was too late to meet him. But his mother-in-law, Lyalka's grandma, was still living like a hermit in the bedroom with a view of the pitch-mounted roofing felt atop the "Snowflake". She shared the room with the decrepit but malicious lap-dog Bayba and Lyalka's mom.

Lyalka replaced his dad in the line of moral support to the guys departing to Zona. He did not attend the court hearings but he knew on what day they started to the place of serving their time and came to the station for a goodbye thru the bars of a special car, aka *stolypin*….

The balcony in Lyalka's flat went from the living-room into a wide quiet courtyard bounded by the five-story buildings, with occasional Apple trees and the desolate *khutta* locked up with crosswise nailed boards – the incubator for growing criminals. In the dovecot above the *khutta*, Lyalka's younger brother, double-handled both Slave and Rabentus, held pigeons when not in Zona.

Their mother, Maria Antonovna, a dressmaker from the atelier behind the main post-office, once dreamed of a violinist career for Lyalka and she even bought him a violin for the purpose, which he stacked away in the nailed up *khutta* when, like, going to a lesson. So, for all her pains, she had only managed to provide him with the inbred love for good clothes, Lyalka's shirts, and jeans, and shoes were always tiptops. But he also loved music, unlike Rabentus whose interests were confined in his pigeons and *havvage*, that's why he was twice as thick as slender Lyalka.

On that balcony, we listened to the records of Czeslav Neman, Slade, The AC/DC… With the doorbell starting its buzz, Lyalka would go to the hallway and lead the visitor to the kitchen to move them *shmotki*, some jeans or a shirt with foreign stickers.

At times it turned out not a client but some of his brother's bros, or simply a guy from the city rowdies, like Count-Junior, or Horse, who just was short-cutting thru the yard and got attracted by the sound of the loudspeakers (Lyalka's *khutta* enjoyed a dynastic respect) and fancied dropping in to share his notions that everything should be fair and founded on justice. For such a case, Lyalka played some hard-hard rock – The Arrowsmith or The Black Sabbath. Those home-made natural philosophers and champions for keeping the world in line with concepts of true justice could not withstand more than one number and they left the sofa covered with a hard inflexible rag because of a sudden recollection of some urgent business awaiting them City.

Lyalka closed the door after them and, rolling his eyes under the forehead, shook his head with a sigh – oh, those boars! – but the traditions oblige. Then he stroke his fair nail-beard and put on the LP of Engelbert Humperdink…

And he also had craving for knowledge and was not shy to show it. One day he did not hesitate to ask me about the meaning of "excess" after hearing the word from me. In short, he needed me like an oasis among all those justice-lovers.

No doubt, the main fusing factor in our connection was the weed, substituted in bleak periods between the creamy seasons with all kind of pills – noxiron, seduxen, kadein – to give their succor in times of need, only you had to know what should go with what and to which proportion…

He was going out with his girlfriend Valentina to the dance-floor in Loony. Valentina had beautiful Spanish eyes, as one of the boars put it in the form of a compliment, "I'd cut and pick such eyes up on the wall."

One evening I danced with her girlfriend, Vera Yatsenko, though I knew that Quak pined after her for years, but Vera was going out with him for a week or so before cutting him dead for months.

After that dances, Quak stopped me and Vera in the park alley. He asked her for an apology and permission to talk to me. She went on in the leisurely crowd strolling to the exit from the night Loony park. Quak and I stepped aside to the trimmed bushes not to be in the way of the current. I could see that Quak was pretty loose, not quite blind but well plastered. He leaned his forehead against my shoulder and, looking at the ground, said, "Sehrguey, I've been with Olga."

Of course, that friendly confession scraped me deep, but I withheld explaining the fallacy of such a perspective – that it was not he who was with her, but rather she who was with him, and that he was not the only one she took use of. First of all, such subtleties were beyond his scope of comprehension even when sober, to leave alone his current state, and secondly, I needed to catch up with Vera Yatsenko...

I saw her to one of the two-story blocks along Peace Avenue and, when we were standing in the quiet dark courtyard, Quak popped up in the gate and revved forward shedding hail of exclamations incongruous with the peaceful night. There was no other choice but to take a couple of expedient steps forward and shut him up with a restraining punch. He fell on his back, but still went on yelling, "So, that's how you meet?! Got prepared?!"

Probably, the drunk really have their guardian angels, but with that preventive blow at the blockhead's scull my thumb got dislocated and I couldn't box anymore, so when Quak rose to his feet the fight transformed into a wrestling single combat. We reeled over the ground and after the high-pitched admonitions by Vera threatening to call her brother and father to the scene of discontent, we left the yard.

Walking in the same direction, we gradually restored being on speaking terms and briefly discussed details of our recent confrontation, touched, in passing, undeniably succulent attractions of Vera Yatsenko. We never returned to the subject of Olga.

Near the Under-Overpass, he boarded Streetcar 3 departing to the Settlement and I went on, bypassed the Station and proceeded along the railway tracks to Decemberists Street because my shoulder was slightly bleeding, torn by the coal slag cover of the walkway in the two-story block courtyard.

Coal slag is good to keep in check the mud after a rain or autumn drizzle, but as tatami, it falls short of the cinder path.

The next morning I had to tell my parents about my fall off a bicycle – the traditional excuse which causes an understanding smirk in the inquirer's countenance.

> (...probably, the guardian angels are also retiring from their job. Many years later, Quak died the traditional Ukrainian mujik's death – fell asleep in a snowdrift and froze a few meters from his *khutta*.
>
> Sometimes it seems to me that the only place where he still exists is my memories of him...)

Soon I was summoned to the militia station nearby Deli 5 to explain my role in Olga's suicide attempt of which they were informed by the ambulance workers. They took my word that I was neither the instigator nor an accomplice, and let me go.

My mother collected all Olga's clothes and shoes that still stayed in the *khutta*, both light and warm – for all seasons. It turned out a bulky bale which she shrouded within a white cloth to be sent by the railway post cars. I asked Vladya for help and we dragged that bale along the tracks to the station luggage office. For convenience, we cinched it with a rope to the nickel-plated pipe of a window curtain shaft, like, prehistoric hunters or Aborigine savages carrying killed game home. Only we dragged it in the opposite direction – away, for it was not prey, but a loss.

In the office, I wrote the Theodosia address on the cloth and got their receipt indicating the weight. When we got out of there, Vladya obviously wanted to tell me something, but he restrained himself, I always knew that he was more tactful than Quak.

...certain thoughts are better not to be started…

The curtain shaft developed a bend under the load carried all that long way, and I threw it into the bushes behind the high first platform of the station before going to Lyalka…

~ ~ ~

On September 1, at the ceremonial line-up around the big pensive bust of Gogol between the Old and New Buildings, Rector of the Institute, as always, announced that the classes were starting for all except the second and third-year students, who would go for a month to villages with their patronage assistance. The second and third-year students of all the Departments, as always, shouted "Hurray!"

Next morning, the convoy of two big buses carried their load of sophomores along the Moscow highway to the district center of Borzna, from where they took the bumpy dirt road to the Bolshevik village, yet failed to reach it because of the too deep mud in the final couples of kilometers. The students and half-dozen of overseeing teachers get out of the buses onto the roadside and walked along a narrow path trodden thru the green thicket of the rain-drenched corn stalks towards the village where they were to patronize hops harvesting. Almost each one dragged a "torba", the gunny cloth bag filled with the provision taken along from their respective homes.

My burden was much lighter – the guitar put with its neck across my shoulder, and cigarettes in my pocket, so the walk would be a breeze but for my leaking sneakers. In front of me a red sweater, blue jeans, and black rubber high boots, with a white kerchief-visor on top of all, were schlepping their "torba".

> (...I am often amazed at my own self – when meeting an object with their hair longer than mine, the hips wider and rounder, I get taken in completely. I am routed, conquered, delighted and, sticking my paws up, ready to surrender and plead for the victress' mercy...)

"Hi, beauty, your high boots are size 45?" A haughty look down her nose, "46." Like the "hello" so is the response, a poor try at hooking, but, at least, I was not ignored completely. Overtaking the girl, I looked back to smile at the condensed chill in her face and went on, because winking at chicks never was a habit about me even though, reportedly, they like it...

The village of Bolshevik was one wide empty street of half-dozen *khutta*s, and some larger buildings hidden deeper in the fog and dank dampness behind the seldom big trees that still dropped rare heavy drops from their foliage. Everyone went into the one-story canteen filled with grave gloom because of the bad weather outside the low windows. Long tables under the

tattered oilcloth and the piece of plywood to stop dispensing window indicated the purpose of the room.

After protracted negotiations between the overseer-teachers and local authorities, the students began to settle for their stay in the village... A pair of log-walled two-story buildings split inside into four-person rooms were allocated to student girls, while all the guys were stationed in one large hall on the second floor of the club, also made of logs. Each student got a mattress with a pillow, an army blanket, a pillowcase, and a pair of sheets.

I took the bundle to the club and was deeply impressed by the simplicity in the design of the ad hoc dormitory. The low decking of plank shields created an all too familiar view, like, spending a month in an overcrowded clink at the guardhouse. Some thirty mattresses were spread atop the decking, side by side, so for stretching out, a patronizer had to scramble in his mattress on all fours. Fortunately, near the door, there remained a tall billiard table in its pretty worn cloth of faded green spruced up by random snick-and-gashes. Choosing it for my bed, I did not sell myself for a Zona thief-master but simply noticed that each of the billiard balls in the rack on the wall was dented so brutally that the whole set became a collection of crunched up apples. No sane stretch of imagination would suppose any possibility of playing the game, which turned the table into an odd item in the scenery.

Those were the grounds for my sleeping four meters away from the common bed decking, half-meter higher than I was used to, yet without neighbors snoring into my ears. The table's width allowed for a piece of a broken lacquered cue to be placed next to the mattress, because of the bleak rumors circulating among the student guys about the ill-will disposition expressly harbored by the local youth in regard to the snooty new-comers…

We were fed at the canteen three times a day. The students "eeked" and "yakked" but I could not empathize with them, it was as *havvable havvage* as anywhere else. The next morning after breakfast, we walked to harvest the hops whose rows of three-meter stem-bunches coiled up to reach the wires stretched over the field for the purpose.

The dense wreaths of entwined stems, like, live columns of dark-green leaves, had to be pulled down to the ground for picking off them the clusters of pale-green soft cones. When the collected cones filled up the shallow scuttle of two handles, it was dumped into a cardboard box on the scales. The overseer-teacher registered in their notebook the kilos you've brought, for later calculation of your payment after deductions for food and bed. But the price per kilo of harvested crops was so insignificant, that the elementary Arithmetic instantly knocked all the labor enthusiasm out...

Of course, there still remained strong incentives of the sonorous yells and calls of fervent young voices over the field, and so diverse but equally attractive (each in its own way) forms of female students. Yet, my fingers, accustomed to metal of breakers and guitar strings, balked at doing that Chinese-peasant-like assiduous labor. My first day of work at the plantation of hops became the last as well, 2 in 1, you know. After that I did various jobs: I went to the district town of Borzna a couple of times to load the truck with provision for the canteen, and I mended flooring on a cow farm using sundry scraps of boards and planks, and I sawed wood for a local woman in

exchange for the strong murky hooch, and I… and… well, perhaps that's all… but, in general, not too little, after all.

The hop-harvesters had earned about forty rubles in that month. A couple of students working at the dryer got a hundred plus, and I, for all my patronizing efforts, was paid 12 rubles and some small change at the institute cash desk on our return to Nezhyn. Most likely, the money was earned in those three days on the farm where I sawed and nailed boards bridging the dung in the earth-floor.

Once, responsive to a mighty hammer strike, liquid dung jetted thru a gap in between the uneven board pieces, right into my face, and the cow from the nearby stall turned her left eye at me and grinned with so deep satisfaction that I learned for certain – those cattle are not as stupid as they pretend to be. In fact, my main occupation on the farm was playing Throw-in Fool with 3 local mujiks. My photographic deck of cards (quite modest girlie nudes in black-and-white) plunged them into a catatonic stupor, their scrutiny of the dealt hands went on for a real hell of time and they were markedly reluctant to throw in any of the cards and part with the girlie.

> (...now the era has changed and the same card packs, only in color, are sold in the stalls at any railway station...)

One of the students who worked at the dryer, redheaded Grisha from the Bio-Fac, also played Throw-in Fool with me after his work. He was tremendously keen on winning. The hot-tempered guy even found a deck of ordinary cards to replace my black-and-white gallery, but the school of Yasha Demyanko was bringing its fruits, and by the end of the month he had lost to me a twenty-five-bottle box of vodka. However, mindful of Sasha Ostrolootsky's orphanage wisdom, that a bird in the hand is better than a pie tomorrow studded with rubies from the sky, I, on the last working day, told the fiery-cheerful Grisha that one bottle immediately would write off all his debt, and he happily ran to the village store, otherwise I wouldn't get even as much...

I wouldn't say that vodka or hooch were really giving me a kick, no, it’s neither here nor there, but my social position and the opinion of the surrounding society were simply pushing me to booze.

> (...the folks around keep us incarcerated in the unbreak-outable prison of their opinion and no matter what we do it only adds to our ill repute or mutual admiration for our character.
>
> More often than not, we just begin to conform, so if told that some unlucky wretch had to become a boozer because of *noblesse oblige*, I am prepared to believe it...)

For example, a male student from the Phil-Fac with a couple of girls from his course wandered to the farm. They lingered by the stall of the bull hitched with an iron chain. The wise guy threw to the beast a scrap of hay he grabbed from the cow in a nearby stall. On taking the cow's scent in the delivered hay, the bull got horny and kicked up mad bellowing and yanking at his chain.

Quite accidentally, I passed by and that was enough to spice the evening oral news bulletin at the canteen tables with enthusiastic slurping the latest news of Ogoltsoff who guided Phil-Fac chicks on the excursion around the bull's hardon. An utterly pervert misconstruing and belying of my character! Yet, the imprint of your personal image in the collective mind is a horrendous force, and you could never prove to anyone that with my noble delicacy of feelings and trepid adoring attitude to girls I didn't even wink at them, because of my damn innate gentility…

Having familiarized myself with the Bolshevik work and living conditions, I went to Konotop. First of all, to change the sodden sneakers, and besides, there also I was awaited by the pressing harvesting labors... Back in August, Lyalka and I had a couple of regional tours around the corners in the city backstreets away from its noisy main thoroughfares. In the slumberous quietude of the forlorn lanes, we paid good heed to the small but magnificent plantations of cannabis gently waving to us from behind *khutta*-fencing with their bushy branches bearing the load of fuzzily outlined, ripening, heads. Lyalka was the guide, and I was an enthusiastic tourist admiring the diligence of Konotopers at their heartfelt, loving, cultivation of their plots. It was time to help the home-towners in harvesting. And though not everyone waited for my humanitarian patronage assistance, however, there still stayed unharvested sites.

I was a noble robber, well-versed in the concepts of justice, and never snatched more than a couple of bushes from one plantation, and even those 2 were one hell of a load to haul. Whereto? To the nearest nook, for a too shallow and, I would sadly admit, predatory processing. That is, the final product comprised skimpy 10 percent of what could be obtained from the same amount of the raw material when approached with a balanced and well-thought-out technology. And the regretfully meager turnout was, if I were asked, the consequence of deplorable incompetence in such a fundamental field. Elementary ignorance and nothing else…

After laborious night vigils in Konotop, I was already well furnished to plunge into the everyday working efforts in Bolshevik... When on the first night back, I was thoughtfully tuning the guitar —...you leave it without control and anyone would spin the tuning machine, good news the strings are still in place...—two local guys came into the clink-like dormitory who declared of their desire to play billiards.

Out of sheer curiosity—how could anyone play it with the balls screwed up to the utmost?—I rolled my mattress up and put it on a chair by the wall. Well, yes, exactly as supposed, no one could. Not only that the maimed balls jerk-hopped along their wiggling way, but it was them to chose when to jerk and change the tack. The absolutely chaotic unpredictability excluded any aesthetic pleasure distinguishing that strictly harmonized game... On realizing that, the fellas introduced themselves as 2 brothers from a neighbor village.

The information did not arise any discernible excitement among the students sitting in line along the edge of the mattresses-topped decking, and the brothers left...

The following day one of them, named Stepan, called me out from the canteen at midday mealtime. In token of gratitude for my understanding during their previous night visit, he proposed a ride to his village, where we went by his "Jawa"... Stepan pulled up in front of a well-built house and asked to act before his parents that I had been one of his buddies during the hitch

in the Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops stationed in Germany, and now we accidentally met each other in Bolshevik.

His parents were most delighted with our chance meeting and laid the table for the comrades-in-arms... After the second glass, getting in the mood, I asked Stepan if he remembered Elsa, the German blonde waitress from the Gashtet round the corner. Stepan was taken aback, and started to look at me more closely – what if I indeed slept on a bank in the corner *koobrik*?.

A day later, Stepan and I were paying visits to different rooms in both hostels dwelt by girl-students, after they returned from supper in the canteen. He pulled up in a room with my course-mates, but I (fully aware of the absolute barrenness of such a hunting grounds for me personally) went on alone until reached, already on the second floor in the next hostel, the last room to the left.

It was occupied by girls from the Philological Department: Anna, Eera, Olya, and Vera all of whom I was so very pleased to get acquainted with. And they had no other alternative but to be also pleased, without any dance-floors, cinemas and even a TV set around.

Olya, a short amiable girl with the wavy yellow bob-cut hair, asked where my business card was, implying the guitar. Without much delay, I fetched it from the club dormitory, sang some sentimentally romantic trash, and passed the guitar to Olya, who suddenly fancied learning to play it. Meanwhile, I got seated onto the bed of reserved and silent Eera to pick up a trifling conversation in which it doesn't matter what about because it's meant to follow the voice modulations and trace the fleeing shifts in the expression of the eyes and face in general...

It's hard to say whether on that particular or the following night she and I went outside and stood under the yellow light shed by the bulb from the lamppost between the two shabby hostels when I happened to have what the North American Indians call "vision".

I saw the boundless Ukrainian night wrapping us from everywhere and in the blacker dark along its edges, there was raising the buzz of chilly autumn winds already. The only bright spot, besides the bulb overhead, was that face opposite me, smiling and not unfriendly anymore, radiating tiny beams of light which happen when you squint, without fully closing your eyelids. Yet, I was not squinting, not a bit, and maybe even opened my eyes wider, struck with the beauty of that new face. And all that—even myself—I beheld as if from aside, from some point in the immense wrapper who, like me, focused on the vision center, on her face of incredible beauty, kinda warm circle of light in the surrounding darkness, like a lifebuoy to withstand the onslaught of icy cold rattling at the far-off, rimed, horizons.

> (...of course, at that moment I was not thinking any of this lofty trash, and, in fact, I was not capable of thinking at all because at the moment all I could do was looking at her face and falling in love irretrievably...)

The next day Eera did not come to the canteen for midday meal, Vera said that she was on duty – cleaning their room. The moment I came up to the hostel, she went out on the porch with a mop in her hands, in a short gown.

(...the most wide-spread methodology for estimation of female attractiveness is gouging her volumes. The self-proclaimed experts and qualified connoisseurs base their evaluation on the volume of the breasts and buttocks, while gourmets, subtractively, measure the waist... Absolute dilettantism. But what else to expect from all those differently aged junior jerks?

The most convincing detail in a woman, with which she will hook you at once and forever, is her knees. If the glimpse of them warms your heart, makes your shoulders straighten up and your breath go deeper, then stay assured – that's it, nothing more beautiful will ever be met.

If that does not happen, go away and keep looking out, maybe you'll be lucky someday...)

Spotting her knees, I immediately realized that I was right in raising my paws and flashing dumb wit about the size of the high boots, because on the wet trail thru the corn jungle under her blue jeans were those very knees.

Of course, you've guessed already, that it was your mother…

~ ~ ~

Thus, there still remained three full years before your birth, which stretch, supposedly, would suffice for no less than a couple of loves to die away, if we accept naive calculations promoted by the reverend Sigmund Freud.

(...what a blasphemous mockery of the sacred beliefs, eh? Which chesty assault though can easily be parried by the traditional fencing trick of "terz" – to wit, that there are 'no rules without exceptions.' The good ol' move...Yet, it depends on the rules, you know.

If a certain scientist Galileo, when dropping his balls from the Tower of Pisa would have noticed that one of them, marked, for the scientific accuracy, with something like "E + S", all of a sudden started to soar and put out aerobatics tricks, then there would be no law of universal gravitation.

And on that account, our beloved Ziggy can't be registered as a trustworthy die-hard scientist. He should be moved to some other league. Place him among such illustrious coryphaei as Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and so forth, up to the nameless creators of The Thousand and One Nights. There he would fit perfectly with his Tom Thumb, aka "ego", Evil Giant, aka "super-ego", the royal castle of "consciousness", and impenetrable wilds of tropical swampy jungles of "subconsciousness", on the canvas of which he weaves the lacy patterns of his theory.

How dare I?!. So many generations have been conceived and, in their turn, conceived further generations with the blessing of his psychoanalysis!.

Nature does not tolerate emptiness, man necessarily has to fill with something their gray matter, aka brain, aka (using the apt expression of the brain-tapped Battalion Commander of VSO-11) the "highest fucking stuff". And that's the indisputable truth. Nothing but intolerance to emptiness caused the production of all those Bibles-Korans-Vedas-Iliads, as well as belief in the existence of boogies and brownies.

And, obedient to the naive wisdom of nature, we stop marketing the useless bullshit—it's not worth it from a pedagogically correct standpoint—and start bringing into the picture the three years until you'll condescend to be born...)

In the girls' room everything was figured out already, that is everyone got it clear who I was after. Olya's eagerness to learn the guitar playing cooled off but, all the same, I tarried with taking it back to the club dormitory. Just in case, so that I would have an excuse to pop up again, like, oh, I forgot here something... No safety measure would be too proactive if they fall over themselves to blast away to your sweetheart, "Gee, he's married!." I was not denying that dent in my biography, since long sunk in the abyss of the past though. And she never asked to show her my passport!.

(...the booklet in red covers asserting your USSR citizenship was more than just ID card. It registered your movements about our boundless Soviet Homeland, witnessed changes in your matrimonial state, reflected variations in the expression of your facial features every ten years, and more... Folks developed and cherished strong belief in the pleonasmic omniscience of Organon, aka passport. They could on the fly invent and endow it with magic powers.

In a separate development, a militiaman checked my passport and on one of its blank pages (reserved for the stamps in future) detected letter "Z" disguised as a casual smear. The sign told him I was an ex-con, aka *zek*. He couldn't read the duration of my stretch though and escorted me to a senior in his chain of command who fatherly advised him not to take anyone in a raincoat of unfamiliar cut for a threat to the public and state order.

Even under socialism, wise people were still there. Thank you, unknown Captain!.)

That evening a young teacher from the Philological Department came to the girls' room. Probably, to make sure that she didn't skip her duty and checked what was going on there at all. Because apart from me, one more lover started his visits to the room – Czech Jan.

A natural Czech, middle-aged geezer, who arrived within the framework of socialist integration of the fraternal states to drive it home to Bolshevik (which was not just the village but also the name of the state farm for hops-production) the subtle art of drying hops so as to get the right beer. (Czechs and beer for centuries were and remain twin brothers.)

Jan's wife stayed to keep their children in the Czech-Slovakia Socialist Republic. He missed her and, to relieve the longing, fell in love with Olya. That was the reason for his late evening visits and long talks with her about something, I was not sure what namely, because he talked in

Czech. And if it were not for the language barrier, I would not miss interviewing him about the year of '68…

Once the girls arranged a party in the room, so he came even in a necktie, that's a civilized man for you. For the occasion, he brought a bottle of Champagne and canned food, but not from the village store because the canned food turned out more delicious than even the cod liver, after which you had to go to Moscow or Leningrad. And he flatly refused to drink any vodka. Showing at the filled glass he wrinkled his face and patted himself on the heart to emphasize his fear of that swill charged with health problems…

But when the teacher came on her control visit, Jan was not present in the room. She could see for herself that though Eera and I were sitting on the same bed, yet in a quite appropriate attitude – each one at the opposite side rails. All moral prescriptions respected, so, get seated, please, let's have a cup of tea.

The moment she sat at the table, there surged a hell of an uproar in the corridor: You!. Who!. Mother-blother!. The door of the room burst open. And in the dark corridor, five to six guys were looming in two-rank formation.

The teacher turned around from her cup, "What's happening?"

"And who are you here at all?"

She decided to crush them by her authority, "Girls! Tell them who I am!"

And all the 4 girls, in unison, as if in the collective recital which they had been preparing from their kindergarten times, "She-Is-a-Teacher!!."

To which, kinda antiphon, "Then fuck her!"

> (...well, yes, not all in our younger generations are brought up in the proper way, and non-rural areas, regretfully, are not exceptions to the rule...)

During that matinee dialogue, I, of course, realized that they had come after my soul. The night before, a girl from the next hostel came running to the club dormitory and raised the alarm about local guys misbehaving in her room. You bet, I ran there and saw a scene of confusion on the first floor. Some girl was crying, 3 local guys were confronted by 3 student counterparts stuck in a futile discussion on the subject of "and who are you?" In short, a stalemate position.

To solve the etude, I chose the bigger guy among the locals and asked the crying girl, "This one offended you?" "Yes!"

I punched the guy. The locals vanished without a trace and the common agitation subsided. Later that guy and 2 more with him waited for me at the entrance to the club. "It was not me," he said.

"I'm sorry," said I. "I had no choice." How could I explain to him that so I was trained by Chief of Staff: a fact of violation should be followed but the fact of punishment? Only Chief of Staff—which is characteristic—did not ask me for forgiveness...

It seemed that my apology was not accepted, and the uninvited guests to the tea-party arrived to demonstrate a Bolshevik-styled vendetta. From under the bed, I fished out the empty champagne bottle and stood up close to the doorway. They kept barking outside but abstained from stepping in – the bottle had rather weighty looks. How could they know that my martial art level was less than a fig and minus?

Some footsteps sounded in the corridor and, behind the guys, I made out Stepan. He grasped at once what's what, and attacked from the rear. I also jumped out into the corridor with the warcry, "Come fucking here!" It worked no worse than on Shoorik – the guys flinched and fled. Stepan and I were adding stimulation to their stampede, but I already hadn't the bottle in my hands, I didn't remember where it got lost. The memory retained only their unanimous clattering down the stairs with Stepan racing in their wake.

I was left one to one with the guy who in the mutual commotion failed to pass the bottleneck of the stair-flight and stuck upstairs. His spirit though blasted without a fight. Giving in to his fate, he limply drooped onto the railing and was sagging there like a wet mat, considering from above the steps down there on which he was to plop.

And I grabbed him—*noblesse oblige*!—but then I heard a cry; very distant, hardly audible, like the one that called me on the snowy road nearby the nine-story building in Stavropol. I observed the submissive jelly of a guy. What for?. So, I turned around and went down the corridor back to the room.

> (...I agree all that sounds more than oddly, but at times strange things do happen. Some people hear voices, but I heard cries, distant, from afar...)

And once again she did not come to midday meal. I went to their room. Eera was sitting alone and did not want to talk. I sat on the bed by her side, took her hand... I liked that hand and those fingers, long and tapering. I only did not like the whitish narrow scars on the inside of the left wrist, as from a teenager's toying with the suicide, but I never asked about them. And at that moment I only asked what's wrong.

She sobbed and said that in the morning on the plantation, the senior overseer was putting her to shame. He told it was unworthy of a teacher's daughter to have anything in common with such a renegade and married man as I was. And that he would call her mother, and tell her everything the first thing on our arrival back in Nezhyn.

But what was there to tell about!?. And of which teacher mother?.

"Of Ger..maaaaan.." and the tears quashed her speaking.

"Damn them all, then! Come with me!"

"Where?"

As if I knew where, but she agreed, and we went out there... At first, it was a field of corn, not the one over which we walked at our arrival, here the stalks were shorter and scantier. Then the field tilted down and we came up to a long secluded stack of straw.

The day was warm and clear. We stretched out on the straw broken off of the stack side and were lying there, talking, kissing. I wanted to open up to her my whole soul, up to admitting that I was a space cadet. And I wanted her so badly, only the sun was in the way. But with the approach of the evening, the solitude dissolved. Next to the stack, there appeared an unnecessary dirt road, some trucks and motorcycles started to pass by, gaping at her red sweater…

We returned in the dark and were met by Anna, who waited for us between the hostels to warn about the ambush up there. She also told that when the senior overseer teacher came to their room, he screamed and shouted that both Eera and I had shunned work but were seen strolling around, and the dean offices of our respective Departments, as well as the Institute Rectorate, would be informed about such brazen breach of discipline.

During the briefing, Olya, Vera, and Jan emerged from the darkness for the joint brain-storming of the problem: what to do? Jan kept shaking his head and repeating in Czech, which had already grown a bit more intelligible, that "it is-a not-a good-a". Olya ordered him to shut up, and better go to the canteen to fetch some food for us; because only he could do it without evoking unwanted suspicions... Jan and Olya were understanding each other without translation; so he soon returned with a newspaper parcel for the hunted-after "milovitsy". I did not know that I was that hungry.

Meanwhile, the girls were quick at drawing a plan for the campaign of persecuted students against oppressor-teachers. Eera and I would go to Borzna, the native town of Vera, and stay for the night at the *khutta* of Vera's parents. In the morning, Eera would go to Nezhyn as if she had gone there 2 days before because of being unwell, and I would come back to Bolshevik as if coming from Konotop, unaware what's the fuss.

Czech Jan saw the 2 of us to the road out of the village, still preaching about "lovely pretty *milovitsy*" and we left into the night...

The night was dark and windy and the road all potholes, and longer than 10 kilometers from the approximate estimation by Vera. Eera got very tired, and in the end, I even piggybacked her like Gogol's Homa Brutus the witch bestriding him, for the distance between 2 posts in the roadside electricity line.

Having already been on a visit to Vera's *khutta*, Eera found it even in the dead of night. Vera's mother bedded us on the floor in the living room and promised to wake Eera up for the seven o'clock bus to Nezhyn. We lay down and, to my embrace, Eera said that she was too tired and that she had to get up early. In a moment she was fast asleep, but I still lay for a long time full awake, gloating and grinning in the dark that we had rubbed the senior overseer's nose in it... No trumps? No ace? Grab my cock and wipe your face!.

When I awoke in the morning, Eera was gone and Vera's brother gave me a lift to Bolshevik by his "Jawa" bike. Students and teachers were just coming out of the canteen and he, cracking his motor, carried me alongside the crowd in the slow triumphant ride. A certain stupid asshole stood still with his jaw dropped. Yet, Vera's brother was disappointed when to his inquiry I answered that Eera and I had no sex on the floor in their living room…

~ ~ ~

She stayed in Nezhyn for a long time, and I again gave in to the image enforced on me by the society... 3 workmen from Borzna came to conduct a stretch of running water; the pipe of half-inch cross-section in a knee-deep trench. I was passing by and helped them a little because of nothing better to do. The mujiks got emotional and bought some vodka, yet without a snack. A throwaway kitchen oilcloth was found and spread under a cherry tree, we sat on it with our feet lowered into the trench for comfort, and killed the bottle.

And then the senior overseer came up to witness the disgraceful recidivism when, instead of work, I was at boozing drastically, so he again began to croak what was awaiting me, when back in Nezhyn... While the youngest of the workmen went to the store after a catch-on addition, I dropped in at the plantation. My course-mate girls started to speak up that I did not notice my own and keep the company exclusively with the girls from the Philological Department. I told them I was a Slavophil since my early childhood, so the Anglo-Fac's beef to heels did not turn me on, in short: Phil-Fac forever!

Then the mujiks called me from the trench. We finished the extra bottle too, sharing a doughnut for a snack, and I passed away on that same tablecloth. Like, enjoy our specialty dessert... Later, the senior overseer in his accusatory speech focused on the fact that the students, returning from the plantation, had to pass by me served-up in that spread flat form. Although the distance between the road and the trench was about 5 meters, I was still ashamed to hear about it. But that was later…

3 days after, Vera went to Borzna, and I accompanied her to make a telephone call to Eera in Nezhyn.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"How d'you?"

"Nothing."

"You… well… come back… eh? I wrote a song here for you." And what more sensible could be expected of a balmy fop like me?. In fact, I did not write a song but made a Russian adaptation of the then-popular hit "It's raining, it's pouring (you might be sorry)..."

"The weary whisper of this endless rain

Drowned hopes of seeing you again,

Dripping drops with their low drone

Make me feel forlorn and lone

And drive me mad with their stance:

"You can be happy only once!"

What's the use of all your weeping, rain?

Keep it back, don't spend on me in vain,

Let the wind dry up your tears

With a swarm of fallen leaves

I don't need any preaching rains

They can't bring back my happy days..."

Zampolit wouldn't approve that again it was about the recidivistic rain, but so was the lyrics in the original, and the chord sequence was really cool...

Coming back with Vera, we didn't go along the road but took a shortcut over the vast fields which she was familiar with. There happened some secluded square hole nearby the path, like a former dugout, all overgrown with inviting carpet-like grass, where we entered for a midway repose. Vera was a beautiful black-haired girl of dark complexion and commanding air. When she got fed up with my incessant babbling about Eera this, Eera that, we hit the road again.

Getting out of the hole, I noticed candy wrappers in the grass. It seemed to be a local dating house, where I failed to live up to my image… Many years later, Eera told me how on one of the endless evenings in Bolshevik, before my drifting to their room, they arranged shaman dances behind the closed door. Vera hung a piece of sausage and a pair of onions from her sports pants and went off to roll and jump in that disguise: uh! Uh!

> (...those swarthy Slav females would out-sex anyone when left on their own, and here lies the clue to the music by Igor Stravinsky...)

Eera came back to the village, and I spent the night in their room. It happened all by itself. We lay dressed on her bed and kept hugging and pressing more and more tighter and closer to each other, and then there remained nowhere any closer. Only I did not want to creak the bed, like Marc and Katranikha, which called for slowing down the action...

(...Anna did not sleep then and she later told Eera that at some point she couldn't control herself and kissed her own forearm...)

...but I still liked it.

The next day Eera admitted, "Seems, I'm thru the psychological barrier."

"Gosh! I kinda thought the physical got done with too..."

~ ~ ~

After Olya refused to marry Jan, he instantly grew Russian. The sufferings inflicted by his turned down love peeled all the varnish of civilization off the Czech European. He never learned the language though, but he dropped shaving and walked around in bristles wearing a black padded jacket, from under which he took a bottle of vodka—at uneven intervals—and swallowed from its neck, like Validol or some other medication. Sort of homeopathy in the Bolshevik style...

On the last night before our departure from the village, Vera, with a lot of care, prepared a bed for me and Eera in the next room, which had already got vacated. I did not turn the light off, and later Eera told me how much she was confounded at the sight of what I was getting on top of her with.

In the morning, before the arrival of the buses, she kept mum, hardly talking to me except for "yes", "no", "nothing". I did not manage then to bring out, that her mood resulted from Olya's forewarning that all we had had there was merely a "collective-farm affair" and back in Nezhyn, I would not give Eera another look.

When the buses came, I boarded neither of them, but put the guitar over my shoulder and walked towards the windbreak belt along the Moscow highway at the distant horizon, to go hiking to Baturin and from there to Konotop…

"Rumors have it, you've got an affair with a teacher's daughter?"

"They say, you've got married?"

Yes, she had and was in Nezhyn on a flying visit to get aright some papers, and dropped into Room 72 in the Hosty, before leaving for Mongolia where her husband was sent to serve after graduating his military school. By the by, he realized she was not a virgin. After the first wedding night he asked, well, they say, that women, usually, as if would, like, compare... "Yes, that's true," she answered and didn't add a word to it.

(...that's how she fucking crushed the poor fool. Just stepped on and smeared away.

> Why not spread it thick and comfort him affectionately, like, there’s no one quite like you, babe, you’re the best man I’ve ever had, nobody's fit to hold a candle to you, my hero lover?.
>
> Women are the most cruel creatures if you ask me. And should we really be so much surprised at having Tughriks among us?...)

However, sometimes you'd better make love, not talk. And we lay on the former Fyodor's and currently my bed because it was by the window. The first and only time in my life, I was with a married woman, and that's only for the old sake's' sake.

When we got dressed and hugged goodbye each other, she exclaimed, twice, "I'm a whore!"

Yes, and sounding way too happy, like, Archimedes in his famous jogging after a bath. "Eureka! I found myself and I know what I gonna do in Mongolia!"

Farewell, Nadya. Whatever and regardless, you're the most cloudless love in my life…

The senior overseer kept true his threats to me. And there was a general meeting of the English Department with just one issue on the agenda: petitioning the Institute Rectorate to send me down.

The day before it, on Veerich's advice, I called the meeting of my course-mates—well, of those living in the Hosty—who gathered in Room 72, to rally the ranks, so to say... Veerich was a current fourth-year student, who also entered the Institute after his hitch.

They crowded in, got seated on each other's laps – all girls, except for Igor and Volodya. I'd never have believed that such a swarm could fit into our pencil-box room. So, I had to perch on the window sill. It was some rally of supporters! Damn! They came together united by one wish – to admire me crushed, wrung out of my image, crucified on that windowsill. The saliva was dripping even from their eyes, like by those public execution goers. They came to lynch me beforehand, impatient to wait for the general meeting, because in Bolshevik I turned my nose up at our Department girls. They craved to quarter me, impale, to put me at the stake for that unpardonable slogan – "Phil-Fac forever!"

One of the girls even accused me of uttering to her something eye-to-eye, which she wouldn't forget until her last day and never forgive me for saying that. She even had to quench a sob, when telling her sad story. Everyone rushed to ask eagerly—what words were they?—but she only blew her nose and repeated her oath to carry them with her to the grave. Even I got intrigued – what kind of so stirring words might I have known? Moreover, until that moment it never occurred to me she was from my course, I could swear to see her for the first time!

Then I got tired of that Lynch trial session. "Okay," said I, "many thanks for your most kind support, but I still have to prepare my homework for tomorrow's classes." Irina from Bakhmuch nearly choked with chortling...

At the meeting, after the overseer's declamation, a couple of my course-mates took the floor to confirm, that, yes, I went to work only when I wanted to, and shamelessly slept on the oilcloth.

Then Veerich attempted at breaking the monotonous mood. He leaned on the lectern and, facing the audience, began to broadcast what kind of a reliable comrade and friend I was, and recently I did my best to rescue a couple of freshman girls subjected to hooligan harassment in the Count's Park. I bravely rushed at the villains, although one of them had a neck from a broken bottle in his hands... Here, Veerich stepped out from behind the lectern to demonstrate for the audience the proper way of gripping a spalled off neck in your hand, and commented that such a weapon was more dangerous than a common knife. The audience froze in awed attention to the disclosed details...

On the whole, he did not deviate too much. That day Slavic and Twoic ran up to Room 72 from the hostel lobby. There was a first-year student, they said, in a fit of hysterics 'cause some guys had stopped her girlfriend in the park and were keeping her there. The 3 of us raced to the indicated place and shooed off 3 local guys. And the saved mantrap started to scream her guts out, that we were busters who ruined her personal life. It seemed one of the would-be rapists had become her target. Damn! Don't call me anymore to rescue a twat gone a-hunting!. However, the detail with the bottle's neck was a free-style fantasy flight brooded by Veerich's imagination.

In the end, I was given the floor. "Everyone is forging his own destiny. Here is mine, white-hot, right from the forge and now it depends on you how it will turn out..." Then I gave out a repentance à la Marc Novoselytsky at the meeting dedicated to the Game of Parties and with a minimal margin—who's for? against? abstained?—I received a severe reprimand with the final note of warning…

> (...although the outcome of the meeting was clear before it even started – were I kicked out then where would you come up from?. Certain shell-fragments cannot but miss...)

~ ~ ~

Every good news has some crappy lining. Hardly I rejoiced that sending down whizzed harmlessly by, as it was time to stick my neck again into the hateful noose. The KGB Captain beaconed with his newspaper: come to report and get instructions. At the secret meeting, it turned out that I became a hand-me-down item at their enterprise. The Captain for his heroism and vigilance displayed during the Game of Parties was rewarded by the rise from the provincial backwoods to the capital city of Kiev. He did not hide his joy passing me as a stock-in-trade to his successor.

The successor was a black-haired young man who had just graduated from some institute in Chernigov. The educational institution had a special Historical Department there at which they were forging Party Cadres. After that Department you weren't sent to a village to work off for

your diploma, you got a job no lower than at some District Party Committee and then – grow up in your career to become a Member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU, if your liver can cope with the amounts of alcohol on the way and you've got a felicitous gift of assuming, pliably and aptly, the right position under current leadership.

But not everyone was up to graduating that Department. 2 students from the Philological Department at the NGPI got transferred there, and a month later they blew off all the career prospects and came back. The discipline at the special Department was like that in a cadet school. With the lecturer entering the classroom, you had to stand at attention, otherwise the group headman, also a student, would get at you like a construction battalion *pheasant* at a newly drafted *salaga*. And in the hostel, everyone kept strict to the rules and peeking after everybody else to catch pants down and knock on them. After all, there were district committees and District Committees, one might be in a muddy district center, while another in the capital city. A trite example of the struggle for survival – the more competitors you outlive, the harder it is to outlive you…

That young black-haired KGB man had a long sheepskin coat and did not inquire about the price of mine. And he was much more mobile than the promoted Captain or, maybe, the upstart hadn't yet grown lazy. Anyway, the secret meetings with me, he arranged at various city institutions. For instance, in ZAGS closed after a working day or in the Tourism Bureau. One time it was in an empty apartment on the fourth floor of a five-story building, not far from the main square. To that meeting, he brought along his new boss. Once upon a time, a male with the looks of that boss was stamped as "an interesting man" – gray hair in a clean cut above a youthful, well-tanned, face; a European gloss was felt at once. I don't know what for he was transferred from Hungary to the provincial backwoods of Nezhyn, where he got interested in a rat whose finking helped his predecessor in the promotion to Kiev. However, I couldn't serve a springboard for him either. Enough was enough; I had got thoroughly fed up with that shit.

My invariable reports to the black-haired KGB young man, that the current student youth was an amorphous mass, indifferent to anything except for the present stock of lard in their "torbas", were almost bringing him to tears. The playful times of gamey gossip were over, I unilaterally stopped narking on my co-students. But he had so irrepressible desire to dig something out, that even send his secret collaborator to Room 72, in case I was a double agent, and kept an underground printing house under my bed.

Of course, that secsot did not introduce himself as a rat with the operational pseudonym "Vova", yet I still figured it out. Would a normal student from the Physics and Mathematics Department ask me for help with his English? With all the “pro” and “cons” secured by my image? Hooey! The shammer drove a fool about living in the same hostel as me. Okay, dude! No problem!

So, here he comes. I hospitably encourage him to take a seat on a freshman's bed and call the exercise number from the textbook he’s brought along, and he starts doing the exercise. So I can return to the table with the players in the already started "pool" of Preferans around it. And what will he sneak into his notebook for his report to the KGB man: "seven in spades", "trick", "pass", "miser"? At those carefree times, the Ministry of Health has not yet started to print its warning on cigarette packs and the malignant deadly tobacco smoke kept filling Room 72 with its

tumbling, slowly whirling layers. The non-smoker martyr of a rat learned it from his severe exposure, that stool-pigeoning was hazardous for health. It took him just two visits to make sure that, yes, the student body was hopelessly amorphous and miserably supine – beggarly two kopecks for a trick.

But once the young KGBist dictated me a telling on Zhomnir. There was nothing compromising in the text though, just that on such and such a day, at such and such an hour Zhomnir was coming out from the Language Laboratory. Well, the Language Laboratory was not a safe house and contained just the laboratory assistant at her desk, and a swarm of freshmen behind the glass doors in the booths, parroting the tape-recorded texts "Meet the Parkers" from the headphones on their heads. Some absolutely inappropriate place for disseminating of the Ukrainian nationalism.

I guess, the dictation was done just in case, after the KGB man found out that I was visiting Zhomnir at home to discuss my translations for *Translator*, which I never cut ties with. Such a piece of paper could always come handy: "Some familiar hand, isn't it, Alexander Vasilyevich?"

My final mission was making friends with an American. There was a ten-day USA Agricultural Exhibition in Kiev, so I was instructed to visit it and make friends with at least someone from their staff. I took Slavic with me and we whizzed by a local train to Kiev, and there to the grounds of the Republican Veh-Deh-eN-Kha with the exhibition held in a huge white-tin Quanset Hut.

A live American was then a rare phenomenon, so at the exhibition, you could hardly squeeze and push thru the crowd denser than that to the Lenin Mausoleum in the Red Square in Moscow, or at the traveling menagerie in Konotop on a Sunday afternoon. Inside, under the rib-curves in the arched roof, up above the streaming crowd, hovered black-and-white Jimmy Carter, kinda Host to the Quanset Hut Show with his best wishes to the Soviet People, white-on-black. And the crowd carried you farther alongside the glossy barriers splitting compartments on both sides – farm tractors, machines, pictures of happy rural life. In one small section there stood a dummy pig, some nice creature, with large flowers painted all over it, in the style of "Yellow Submarine" cartoon by The Beatles. And next to the ornamented piggy there stood a girl, but alive. Not my style though, if not aware that it’s an American you wouldn't waste another glance at her.

So, she stood by and kept squeaking like a clockwork, "This is a piglet! This is a piglet!" But her staring eyes, long since stunned, dim, and glassy, turned kinda swoony slugs and swam over all that rumbling crowd that flowed past her for hours, like some f-f..er..I mean, flooding Niagara Falls without the tiniest splash of response to her words from the thrumming waves of strange faces.

I pitied her and slowed down by her stall, "Hey, girl,” says I, “Call it *porosyonok*."

"This is a piglet! This is a piglet!"

(...at that time the two great nations were not prepared for a dialogue yet...)

I and Slavic went out and sparked in the dank spring wind around the giant Quanset Hut. When back in Nezhyn, I reported to the black-haired that those Americans were too introvert. He realized that both "introvert" and "amorphous' stuff was not the right building-blocks for his career and grew sad…

That mission turned the last one because soon after I dug a hole for myself to fall into... The black-haired KGBist really fretted me already with his importunate demands to write a report and not to just play with the word order. And there popped up something to make him happy without harming innocent civilians... In the institute reading hall, on the second floor of the New Building, I was leafing thru a biography of Bogdan Khmelnytsky when on one of the pages I saw a mark in pencil: "Bogdan Khmelnytsky is a traitor to the Ukrainian people". I mentioned it in my next report to the KGB.

The guy was delighted – calling the initiator of the Ukraine and Russia reunion a traitor was visibly steaming with the Ukrainian nationalism. "On which page?"

"Well, somewhere in the middle."

So, they arrested the book, found the subversive page and, at the following meeting, "But it was you who wrote that."

"What?!."

"The hand is yours, that's what. No use of denying. You better admit." And he started to intimidate me with full-scale expertise. 2 weeks later, he explained that the letter "a" in the pencil inscription was very like to mine but a little different; so the graphologist told him. Yet—which is characteristic—he did not even apologize.

In general, I, like, got offended and stopped to turn up for the loathsome dates, no matter how diligently he flashed his semaphore newspaper. And at chance meetings in the city transport, I was cutting him dead with a disinterested indifference of a stranger. He seemed to understand that such a secret collaborator is as beneficial as 2 aces in the kitty when playing miser at Preferans, and pissed off. So the KGB archives ceased to accumulate the reports with my handwriting signed "Pavel" of which I never regretted. My affair with the organs was anything but a happy one...

~ ~ ~

(...yes, but now I have to rewind, who were they – Slavic and Twoic?..)

They were a couple of first-year students, who entered my life at the Hosty to substitute for Fyodor and Yasha. Slavic was from Chernigov, he matriculated the English Department and even lived in the same room with me. And he had also served in a construction battalion, but being a member of the well-to-do society stratum, he spent his hitch in the capacity of a warehouse manager. I mean, he came from a family wealthy enough for keeping successful negotiations with the Commanders of his military unit.

> (...lots of things in my life flowed by unquestioned because I was never good at analyzing and just lived on with any bullshit implicitly taken for granted. Now I know why in our great Soviet Homeland of working people by working people for working people with equal rights for all and everybody, certain people happened to have their rights equaller than the average.
>
> It's only there's no way to pass my present wisdom to that hairy yobbo of myself, happy with his/my blissful ignorance. There's no way to reach over there, I cannot re-run my life, I can only re-tell it.
>
> But, hey! Who cares? Probably, those hyper-equalized folks had just found a maverick treasure in their stove chimney...)

To the construction battalion, he also got because of some sight problems hidden behind the smoked lenses in his glasses. The long forelock of straight chestnut hair slid across his forehead – from edge to edge alongside the glasses rim, and he did not shave his upper lip, saving soft female tendrils trimmed with scissors...

The guy, schooled at his hitch in a construction battalion, knows the meaning and origin of the all-forgiving mellowness and omni-comprehension in the optics of his roommate returning after a short absence to the nearby Count's Park. A former conbatist will find in himself enough determination to ask a direct question and, after a direct response, to beg for a joint. In the enlightened circles, it is termed as "clinging to the tail".

Weed cemented us and made, practically, inseparable. I recollect the case of a winter empty suction, when bang in the middle of week I rushed to Konotop, by 3:15 local train – there and by 19:05 back to Nezhyn. So, Slavic kept me company because of being such a sterling loyal friend.

In Konotop, we went to Lyalka's who asked me if I remembered that bastard on a visit from St. Petersburg.

How not to remember? I liked his boots right away, obviously weighty, you could see at a look it was some sturdy footwear. Lyalka then was at conquering the visitor with the sweep of lifestyle in our provincial backwater. The Petersburger was taken to the host's section in the basement, where weed was reaching the condition; we sparked there – not bad it was, some real stuff for high flights in circles of any height...

"So 2 days ago," sez Lyalka, "that bitch bombed my basement. Broke the door and took it out. Sehryoga the King saw him at the station getting on the Leningrad train with a backpack."

Yea, that's what you call a cleanly done job because St. Pete had always been the cultural capital of our country... In short, Lyalka forked out a couple of heads, but warned that the quality hadn't been tested yet. Then I, just in case, dropped on 13 Decemberists and found one or two twigs in the attic of the brick shed.

On the train back, it became completely unbearable, and I stuffed a joint from Lyalka's donation in the car vestibule, while Slavic acted a make-believe screen around me with his fur headgear on top... We sparked it right there, smoked, entered the car and got seated on the benches, opposite each other. He looked at me, I looked at him, in the hope, so to speak, maybe it's just that I didn't have time enough to feel the touch?. But it's all bullshit. If you start cultivating wishful expectations of that sort, then the stuff has no more dose in it than clippings from a kitchen broom.

We arrived in Nezhyn, each one full of glum and dismay. By the time we reached the Hosty, it was completely dark. But, just in case, we walked to the Old Building... Night. Desolation. Winter... I stuffed one from the grabbed in the attic. Sparked it. Slavic was standing by, but manly restrained himself.

I took another drag and said, "Slavic..." (...and from the marble plaque on the corner of the Old Building with the inscription "N. V. Gogol studied here..." my own words echoed back to me...), "...it's not in vain, that we have ridden three horses to death today." So said I, and passed the joint into his craving claw…

As for Twoic, he was a guy from Bakhmuch named Sasha whom I renamed into "Eternal-Two-Getter" because "two" was the poorest mark for school kids, but then the handle was shortened to Twoic. Reciprocally, he dubbed me with the handle of "Hooey-Pricker" derived from my half-tabooed warcry by which I answered any kickbacks in life, "We'll prick any hooey thru!"

In fact, he was not from Bakhmuch itself but from a village adjacent to it. On account of that, he liked to pass for a naive child of nature and acted a simple-minded peasant yokel. Each weekend when he started back to Nezhyn his parents collected him a generous "torba" with ample grub. On the whole, it was a bulky farm boy.

Man's nature is best reflected in their laughter. By Twoic it was a sharp yank of his moon-like broad face up to chortle two-three squeaks out, with his eyes shut tightly, and then, as the round face was lowering back, the pair pin-sharp pupils would frisk thru the portholes of his squint, checking the current situation: what's how? Just so a recklessly cautious character…

Studying at the Biology Department, he, naturally, lived on the second (the Bio-Fac's) floor at the Hosty. Twoic was another "tail-clinger", though not as keen as Slavic. The main factor to turn us into an inseparable trinity was Preferans which is a great game if you take a closer look at it. Poker, Snore, King or its reduced version – Eralush, are just a contest in actor skills, while Preferans is an intellectual game of mind. Only I had constant bad luck at it... I tried to break that tendency and tame the fortune, and, because of that, I kept taking desperate risks. "Bluish" misers became the trademark of Hooey-Pricker.

It was clear as day that because of the crimson tablecloth stolen from the redhead *dembel*, I had fallen out of grace by Luck, so I tried to overcome that status quo, whatever the costs, and gain back a grip at the fortune's forelock. As a result, getting 2 or 3 "throw-ins" or even a "train" of them at playing a regular "bluish" miser, I sat, deject, indifferent, and languid, in a bummed-out prostration until the end of the "pool of 40" in progress…

I was paid the regular student scholarship of 45 rubles a month. Almost every weekend, my mother gave me 10 rubles before I left for Nezhyn. All the money went to my card debts, well, plus the *havvage* at the canteen. The tall bottles with dry wine forsook me; I switched over to the healthy way of a sober life. Although constant being down-and-out was f-f...er...I mean, flatly bending me out of shape.

Besides, Twoic and Slavic played "a mutual paw", that is as a team, having conspired, which means forget the hope that your seconded King, or Queen backed by two lower cards, will ever bring you a trick. United efforts of 2 playing "a mutual paw" would strip the single-handed opponent of a trick, or a chip at 50 percent of the games in the pool. Such is the law – severe, but just: there are no bros at cards; shut up your driveling gape when among pals.

> (...of course, you do not need to understand all this Preferans terminology, but, to get the feel, imagine a couple of muggers working in a minibus: one holds the victim's hands while the other frisks and picks the pockets.
>
> The difference though is that you won't take the same minibus seeing them on it, while in Preferans' case you will come up to them the next day and say, "Well, will we "draw a pool", or will we?" Of their conspiracy, I was directly told years after graduating from the NGPI...)

Of course, I noticed their "mutual-paw pedal system" of scratching their eyebrows and pulling themselves behind the earlobe, under the guise of reflexive body movements, but I did not care a damn. It was not them but my fate I vied to vanquish in the single combat gambling, even if it chose to wile using the pair of tricky pawns... Knowing that "they play" in Room 72, Preferans lovers from other Departments also came to us. With those, I was breaking even, I would have stayed in the win, but for the adamant propensity for unreliable—"bluish"—misers…

In addition to being always ready to play cards, Twoic served a source of useful acquaintances. With his mediation, a pair of cute, educated local fags paid a couple of visits to our room. One of them told "pinkish" jokes, "Then get, you naasty fascist, a grenade from a Soviet homoseexual!" With much gusto and very accurately, he emulated the fey droll of fairies. And Dr. Grisha shared how visiting the beach of Golden Sands in Bulgaria, he screened his partner, who was lifting the golden watch from the clothes on the sand left by an Englishman taking a swim in the sea... We laughed again.

No, Twoic was not a homo. And I hadn't met a single one at the institute. What's the point? To matriculate and land among a group of girls? So the gay guys just flashed by like a funny episode. However, Dr. Grisha was useful indeed. Once he arranged a twelve-day sick leave for me, writing some bronchitis in the diagnosis. Such a cute little man; he had very beautiful hair, though the word "hair" wouldn't suit it, I'd rather say – a wavy chevelure. And he was handsome of face too, only that a little short. But his brown soft briefcase was large, as well as his hips which he rolled in his gait. I was on friendly terms with him, despite the difference in orientation; nothing like it was in the case with Tughrik. By the way, Dr. Grisha was also married and had two children, boys both of them…

But a three-day leave for acute respiratory disease, aka ARD, I could easily procure without Dr. Grisha's help. Behind the Old Building, there stood the institute's one-storied hut of the medical center. You come there in the morning before classes, and they give you a thermometer and, if there is the temperature, you receive a stamped slip of paper for ARD which meant 3 days of freedom. Only you needed to warn the headman-girl of your group not to smear the log with "absent" marks, in 3 days she'd have the reference.

Twoic, as a biology pundit, shared that the temperature significantly rises in the area of strained muscles, but the armpit is a bunch of muscles. Placing a thermometer in there, I started to intensely strain and relax that area muscles under the clothes, until the doctor, handled Pill, would say, "Enough!" And the result was never less than 37.3 degrees centigrade.

My falling ill so often perplexed Pill, where was my immune system, eh? Later on, her bewilderment transformed into angry suspicion, and she used to check me with two thermometers at once, one for each armpit. So the difference was only one-tenth: 37.3 and 37.2 – all the same ARD.

And then Pill went amok, "Enough! Here's a referral for you – go to the hospital!"

But I did not retreat, and went there, and lay in the hospital for a week and a half, for no reason, actually, just for the principle's sake…

With all that in mind, don't forget about my main occupation – studying. I was sitting thru the practical classes in my group, and at times attended lectures for the students of the whole course, I passed credits and examinations. Besides, I never dropped self-education.

In the second year, I was fortunate enough to meet *The Cavalry Army* and *The Odessa Stories* by Ivan Babel. He convinced me that even after the Great October Revolution there still remained writers in Russia and not just sholokhovs-proskurins-markovs. At the third course, in the institute reading hall, I discovered magazines with *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov. It was a thunderbolt... In my final year, the endless, like the flow of the Nile, Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* were attending the institute to keep me company thru the long lecture hours.

I don't account for commonplace pulp fictions not related to my education, that was read for a pastime. Like, when there was a stir in the Hosty, "Ah, Efremov! *Thais of Athens*! The peak and limit of wildest dreams!" Ilya Lipes gave that hetaera to me for only 2 days. So after the midnight lights-out, I even had to go in the corridor and read it under the lamp above the doors to the washroom and the men's toilet.

I was sitting in a chair, dragged along, with my sheepskin coat thrown over the shoulders but not covering my bare legs because I was too lazy to dress after reading in bed before the curfew. So what? Let them imagine I'm on the beach…

But with all due respect to Lipes, that's not literature but just another illustration from the textbook *The History of the Ancient World* for the fifth grade of secondary school. When a schoolboy, I liked those gaudy pictures of the Egypt slaves dragging stone blocks to the

pyramids, of the Roman legions on their march and other suchlike masterpieces. Some seductive means of education, no denying, yet comics strips and literature are not the same things... However, you cannot know beforehand where a find might be awaiting you, and where a loss.

Sitting out there, by the dark frozen window, with my eyes scuttling along the lines that described an ancient festival, where stark naked participants were having a ritual run thru the darkness of night, I had a vision again. Just for a fraction of a second I got into a dark Greek night and ran, stark naked, thru the black shadows of dark trees under the big moist stars in the sky... But then – flip! – and I am back again in the sheepskin coat, on a chair in the cold light from the lonely fluorescent lamp in the ceiling above the gray concrete floor getting lost in the pushed-off darkness of a corridor in the fast asleep hostel, and my body still tense from that pair of plunging step-jumps in my run thru that split-second, and my skin still feeling the chill of night from that distant past...

> (...now, what to do about all that? Just do as everyone else – brush it aside with a dismissive shrug, forget, and get back to living on.
>
> But the book itself was, nonetheless, lame garbage...)

No better garbage was all those theoretic Grammars, Theorophonics, Scientific Communism, Communist Aesthetics, and oodles of likewise farragoes devoid of any rhyme or reason obligatory taught at the institute... Although, I do understand, in part, the lecturers who poured them out; once upon a time they had to learn all that shit themselves, and now, gaining leverage at the past sufferings, they tormented us, students, because of their dissatisfaction with so crappy life design.

"All work and no play in perineum makes Jack a dull zygote..."

Still, those lectures have certain value when approached properly prepared, I happened to even like one of the theoretical lectures on.... grammar?.. phonetics?. Well, in short, Scnar it was who delivered that Lecture of lectures. It’s only that his last name sounded kinda disparaging handle, but he himself was an acceptable geezer. When I ventured to be locked up in the city hospital because of the medical staff at the institute hadn’t antiviral means to bridle my temperature galloping with so immodest frequency, he lent me *The Quiet American* by Graham Green, in English. I'd hardly survive that week there without that quiet companion because the ward-mate patient from the next bed kept window curtains bubbling with his mighty snore...

Now, before that incredible lecture, when on a weekend in Konotop, I visited Lyalka. He wasn't home and his brother Rabentus warmed me up. I had never come across such grass yet, like some dry emaciated skeletons of tiny twigs. And never had I been in the like jag. After a joint for 2, I watched Rabentus as if thru a lens – his top and chin got narrow and distant while the middle of his mug stretched in a disproportionate zoom-in. He noticed that I had drifted beyond the limits, and advised to rinse my smiler with water from the tap. No use.

But I remembered that I still had to go to Nezhyn. On the way to the station, I dropped to Igor Recoon on Peace Avenue. His mother was cordiality itself, "O, how so nice to meet you! Please, get seated and have a snack before the journey."

As if I could keep sitting! I was dragged back and forth – from the living room to the balcony, from the balcony to the living room. On the way hither-thither, I asked Igor to find some piece of paper for jotting down the things I would say. Something like:

> ***"The stooping sky beheaded dull jumble of the world..."***

and then sort of:

> ***"...the shaggy clouds cut thru the Helmet-Skull unable to fend off welter-onset at the brain beseiged..."***

In short, complete bullshit with surrealistic stink, or else I would be dragged into them those surreal quicksands and drowned tracelessly for good. So, it's only on the train that I came back, in between the Plisky and Kruty stations.

As for those psychedelic scraps, Zhomnir later placed them in the faculty wall newspaper next to *Translator*, he liked them way too much.

But all this not about that but about the lecture turned out by Scnar, it’s only that the memories of that grass keep distracting me, kinda like red herring, sort of. That time Rabentus provided me with a pinch for a couple of joints and, fully aware of what kind of thermonuclear dope it was, I did not abuse it anymore but showed moderation...

Well, now, in such a state—from moderate to quite quiet—I slowly floated to the lecture, kinda zeppelin, because making for the hostel seemed awfully long and winding way at the moment. And we then sat down, so as to make room for Scnar to read it from behind the lectern. And I grew more and more admired what a classy thing it was! The plywood all so yellow and well polished, and gleaming pleasantly because of that, you just couldn’t take your eyes off that varnished thing.

But then I suddenly couldn't get it – the peaceful flow clicked out of the groove and very obviously too, replaced with some affronting discrepancy. Scnar switched over to Latin!. I concentrated but – yes! – exactly Latin... And he was jetting it out even more fluentlier, in a way, than Lupus the Latinist, only that he sounded somehow hollow, and kept his eyes directly upward, like, to you I call *de Profundis*! I cocked up – was that Scnar, or not Scnar after all?

That’s why I started to watch more closely and noticed that above behind the lectern of all the Scnar there remained nothing but a bust. I mean it, atop the yellow box there stood the bust of Scnar even without his arms – just only shoulders. Yet the head continued to speak on all the same. And on his upper lip there notched a tiny cleavage, which began to grow deeper and darker, so as to turn into the toothbrush mustache of Adolf Hitler. Well, go and fuck yourself! In a Soviet institute, Hitler's bust reads a lecture and, on top of all – in Latin! Good fellow Scnar!

Not every lecturer would have the nerve to pull such a trick. Without him, I would still think that if there's a lecture it's necessarily bullshit. Them those stereotypes, they are really die-hard customers, you know…

And with Zhomnir I studied at his home... On finishing another of translations, I brought it to his place, we sat at the table pushed to the wall in his living room and he was shredding it in a dragon-like style – here's flat, there's bland...

Yes, I felt it before his picking the holes out, that those were bosh places, but why? And what was the workaround?

"That's your problem. Find it."

"Maybe, then put it just so and so?"

"No! That'd be out of all scotch and notch!"

To please him was simply impossible, he would always find what to find fault with. And because of that, the work with Zhomnir was a good school not to give up…

To come up for air from the clutches of the Ukrainian language, aka mova, I asked Zhora Ilchenko for one of the books he brought from India and started translating it into Russian. Not a too thick book, some two hundred pages, authored by Peter Benchley, a writer in the third generation, that is both his grandpa and his daddy earned their living in the same trade. The book was titled *The Jaws*, about a shark-cannibal. On the whole, a professionally mixed vinaigrette – a little scrap of everything: bitten-off limbs, a love triangle, a short yet impressive visit by mafia to persuade the sheriff be subtler and show more respect. True, the final scene of the shark's assassination was unscrupulously copied from *Moby Dick*, but who nowadays reads Melville?

While rendering all that in Russian, I finished off a pack of thick copybooks. The translation was completed in Konotop, in winter. So, it was the night from Saturday to Sunday, or else during the winter vacations... The clock on the kitchen wall was showing some of the small hours. Putting the final period, I draw it as big as half-page – I wanted to finish off the ink in the ball-pen but it never ended. Then I turned off the light and lay on the folding coach-bed in the living room. Behind the 2 windows, there stood a whitish night dimly fluoresced with the snow. And it seemed that the night was leaning heavily against the window panes, just about to break in. I tried to get asleep as soon as I could, for I never liked horror movies.

By spring, my sister Natasha read those notebooks, and then leased them to someone else and they dissolved, leaving no trace, in nowhere…

Well, all that's fine; but when about the most important?

Eera…

~ ~ ~

My relationship with her at the reunion stage can be characterized with just a single word – "torture". Trying real hard, one might extend it – "torturing torture". Firstly, taking our relationship up again in Nezhyn ran into a number of stumbling blocks.

Why resume? But I was in love, damn it! It was love at first sight on that tread thru the wet stalks of corn. And it should be kept in mind that, by my nature, whenever I fall in love it is forever. I mean, falling in love, then falling out for just to fall in again, and out... no, such bouncing is not for me. Yes, my father was right applying to me his winged byword about my Laziness-Mommy being born a moment before me. Besides, the return to Nezhyn fully confirmed the accuracy of my choice – with all the multifacedness, multinosedness, multileggedness, multibreastedness of the assortment, Eera was the second to none. Starting with the clothes: in the era of totalitarian shortages, she managed to look dressed in a soigne European way, as in the movies of Italo-Franco-German production. Turning to the undergarments: yes, unprecedented lacy slips under – I've never seen so delicately feminine lingerie in my life. Getting over to the item of most vital importance, the body itself: such bodies as hers, I saw only in the bathroom at the Object, when sitting next to the fire burning in Titan and considering the Goddesses, the Dryads, and the Nymphs of Hellas in the black-and-white illustrations interspersing *The Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece.*

However, her gait was quite modern – the German-like resolute pacing coupled with the sway of her right hand. She had a round face with high cheekbones and a nose with a weeny hump, wide, yet not turned out, lips. The light brown hair of the ideal length, in my favorite hairstyle. I liked to watch her, approaching along the street that lead up to the Old Building, and to follow how in the distant circle of her face the fuzzy, as in the full moon, lines began to merge into my Eera's features. But all that came about not immediately...

At the beginning, Eera trusted in the sinister prognosis by Olya. And even Vera, who had so sympathetically been preparing the bed in Bolshevik for 2 of us to bathe in the fiery stream of lascivious carnal pleasures, dubiously shrugged and hesitated – O, my, they tell so heinous things about him! That's why our initial encounters in Nezhyn didn't look encouraging at all. I even started to suspect that all that happened between us in Bolshevik was just a "collective-farm affair" of a teacher's daughter that used me. So, I pissed off.

After some time, a group-mate of Eera, Anna, came to the Hosty with the errand from Eera who waited for me in the room of their Department hostel by the main square. I followed the messenger cursing on the way my shameful lack of the most elementary male pride…

Eera was lying on one of the beds, for some reason without a sweatshirt, wearing only her skirt and beautiful, as always, lady's undergarment. The girls whose room it was tactfully left us alone. I sat down on the bed next to her, doing my best to conceal how captivated I was by the beauty of her torso and the strangely pale face.

She said that she had had a pregnancy, and a young surgeon-gynecologist made the abortion at his home, under anesthesia. Is abortion done under anesthesia? At home? Young?

(...certain thoughts are better never being thought at all...)

Feelings of guilt and compassion only added to my love. I couldn't help it, I put my arms around her shoulders and, lifting her from the pillow, pressed to my chest. "I love you, Eera. You always know that I love you."

> (...and again I run into my being born at the wrong time. I behave like an ancient Greek from the times when the birth control was females' responsibility – certain herbs, special amulets, you know.
>
> And in the modern enlightened age, the weaker sex has already saddled us and mounted, while still pretending to be weak...)

The start-up misunderstandings (thanks to the kind care of her girlfriends), were further aggravated by unwanted predicaments at establishing normal sexual relations at the first stage of our love affair. Not because of being short of favorable conditions for having sex, on the contrary, when Eera visited Room 72, my freshman-cohabitants, on their own accord, went to the first floor of the hostel to click the TV channels in the hall with the box, or sit over a bottle of lemonade in the refreshment room. The problem had deeper roots...

Not right away, but I noticed that after our having a sex Eera got in a plaintive mood, and on the way from the Hosty to her home she spoke of sad things... How sadly was the wind dragging the autumn leaves across the stadium, visited to say goodbye to track athletics, because of a ligament injury after 2 years of training... How sad it feels, when at a festive table your parents got so absorbed in an agitated discussion of who of them was more right or wrong, that they do not notice you taking already the third plate from the table, and detachedly letting it fall to the floor over the scattered splinters of the first 2 – snap! – before mom and daddy wake up and finally turn to you…

The further, the sadder. The mood changes were replaced by overt sabotage! How else to classify it, if at having a sex your partner wriggles out from under you? It took me a hell of a lot of efforts to elicit the reason for such an unconventional behavior... Well, because she felt something like an urge for uncontrollable urination.

> (...long live to our Soviet education system – the best system in the world! It couldn't maim the village schoolkids to such a degree though. They were saved by direct observation of the natural facts of life. A village girl would figure out at a glance what namely you were rolling upon her with. But the luckless city dwellers?.
>
> In one of the color illustrations concluding the school textbook on Anatomy, there was a partial image of penis modestly hidden in between the intestines out-poured from the belly on the general scheme of internal organs. Those appended pictures were studied by the pupils on their own because during the academic year the class managed to reach only the middle of the textbook.
>
> Now, how could the unfortunate daughter of teacher know the difference between orgasm and urination?..)

I'm far from stating that the problem was solved because of my persistent requests to trust her own body, which was wiser than her. In any case, she gave up wriggling out…

All those painful crises in the relationship called for general relaxation, and restoration of the dented self-esteem. These factors led to the emergence of Sveta, who also lived in the Hosty, and Maria, who did not live there but came on occasional visits, and more oftener I went to spend a night at her place...

Despite the fact, that Sveta studied at the Biological Department, she lived on the fifth floor in the Hosty. During one of her visits from up there to the third floor, she got vanquished by my noble continence, like, a knight-errant driven by merciless weather conditions to a roadside brothel…

I had just returned from seeing Eera to the vestibule in her staircase-entrance when they told me there was chicken soup on the table in Room 77. One of the advantages which the student canteen apportions you is that after visiting it you still can find enough room in your system for chicken soup, any time of day. I entered the room and turned on the light.

On one of the four beds, there lay a girl who did not make a secret of the fact that she had nothing on apart from the bedsheet wrapped about her. More importantly, there was a pot on the table and a couple of spoons. Taking the lid off the pot uncovered the presence of the soup, about two servings. I wiped off one spoon, sat on a vacant bed and started eating. The soup was cold, but unmistakably of chicken. The girl protested from inside her bedsheet that she couldn't sleep with the light on. Turning it off, I threw the door open, because eating soup in complete dark is uncomfortable, so I had to finish it off in the dim illumination from the distant corridor lamp. Some delicious soup, I liked it, even though cold. Then I left.

"The less we love a woman,

The more she is turned on..."

Thus, I began to heal the wounds from the torturing love with medicinal visits to the fifth floor in the hostel. Sveta was simply created for that. Not very tall, of a boyish haircut, she had a slender body and generous breasts. She was good at anything, but her special dish was giving a blow job. Besides, Nature-Mommy endowed her with a valueless blissful gift: a mere touch to her nipples did make her go off for fucking crazily, whining, and there went you, in her wake, to boot.

In addition to psychological impediments formed by the Soviet school system, at times I rammed into unbending ideological dissonance with Eera. Like on that occasion when the institute Rectorate ordered a volunteer clean-up in the Count's Park. The girls of my course were raking the fallen leaves in great heaps, and Igor Recoon and I set them on fire.

After translating *The Jaws*, I knew that burning leaves in the open was a crime against the planet's atmosphere; there was a short passage in the book on that particular point. But could you prove anything to anyone? "Sehrguey, don't put on airs! Everyone does it. We're not in America.”

When in Rome do as Romans do. The Count's Park got drowned in the thick white smoke and we dispersed... Bypassing the Old Building, I saw a girl in sportswear and liked her from afar. I didn't even know why she attracted me so much. Well, the wide white kerchief with big black spots around her neck, that's for one, but certainly not only because of that; and not for the sneakers. I came closer – what the f-f.. damn! – but that's Eera herself!. And, way too deeply moved by the pleasant surprise, I blurted at once about my falling in love with her again a moment before.

"You did not known it was me but fell in love?"

"Yes! Can you imagine?"

"How could you!"

"But it’s you who I loved!"

"You hadn't not known it was me!"

"Hey, think a bit! Since it turned out to be you, then I have no chance to fall in love with anyone else. It's only you that I can love."

"Just a minute ago you loved someone who wasn’t me, and you'll do it again!"

"Who else can I love? Can’t you see it's only you who turns me on?"

"You still can't get it!"

"Okay. So I shouldn't have fallen in love with you?"

"No!"

"Never?"

"No, never!"

A vicious circle – love me but never fall in love with me. But she looked real cool in her sports, and she moved so classy…

> (...with all my mug's game to show off as the crossbred of Casanova and a refined aristocrat of spirit, I am a classical example of a natural chump.
>
> Why? Too gullible and too ready to fall for a new bauble...)

It was enough for Ilya Lipes to drop an unfamiliar word "she-oxen" and I followed him like a puppy on the lead. "Come on! Let's visit the she-oxen!" The casually used term triggered an

imagination flight picturing a skulk of free of complexes hetaeras, but, in reality, they were the same girls as in the hostel. One she-ox was throwing her birthday party.

And now in that half-dark room in an old private house, we were, like, having fun, like, dancing all-out fast dance. Then I would lie with some of them on one of the beds in the next room, and she would in half-sec get topless while blocking any further movements, like any other oxen-vixen, with their usual obnoxious sermon, "Do not torture yourself, nor me!" As if she was strong-armed or blackmailed to go to bed with me. Why coming, if you're so stalwart lesbian or in your everlasting times? To get free rape?!. And so I got blues and went out in the corridor to ring Eera for to disclose over again I loved her, an emo chump.

And she got it right away, "What music is there? Where are you?"

Usually, I called her from the booth in the Hosty's lobby which was almost soundproof, that odd vestibule after the ever-locked door among those 2 entrances, separated from its operational twin by the glass-partition. We would talk for hours until her people at home needed the telephone or some students started to knock at the glass door from the lobby. The talks about absolutely nothing, I just loved to hear her voice. She would say a word over there and I got carried beyond myself wallowing in thrill, in here…

"Just somewhere, I'll explain later. Not a phone talk. I love you. Bye."

> (...everyone knew then that the phones were tapped by the organs so the phrase "not a phone talk" precluded any further questions...)

And later, I had to drive a fool about a bro drag dealer arriving in Nezhyn for a visit who asked me to show him the way to a safe house, where the music was played on the account of his arrival, but I did not stay there and left after calling her on the phone... Some stuff that would hardly fit even in both elephant's ears, to believe such a helpless bullshit one had to be very eager to believe. Although, she might have believed after those icons... Ah, yes, the icons…

They told me that Veerich wanted to see me, and I went to his place. On the winter holidays, he was skiing in the Carpathians and broke one of his legs and both skis. So he kept to bed, plastered. He and his student wife rented a flat in the city. When she went out to the kitchen, Veerich started his monologue about the too far-reaching dirty hand of Zionism groping for our cultural heritage and spiritual assets. That all was to the fact, that Ilya Lipes had 3 to 4 Orthodox icons in his briefcase, under his bed in the hostel. Somewhere they had bombed a village church and now Lipes wanted to push the catch off like antique rarities. How to bear a so cocky impropriety? If not for the plaster, Veerich would never allow trampling our holy shrines… In short, could I bomb the icons back and restore historical justice?

> (...for me, the inter-confessional contradictions were null and void, so on that point Veerich was just another odd voice in the wilderness. I could still believe in Zeus or, say, Poseidon, but all the gods in vogue at present times do not stir any sympathy in me, and in the same breath (which is characteristic) I don't believe in atheism either.

But the request to bomb was properly addressed. No problems! I'm doing what I'm told to do and thinking after it is done...)

In the morning I waited until the students left the hostel for their respective classes. One kick from the drowsy silence of corridor at the unsuspecting door and the lock jumped out... Everything as described – the briefcase under the bed, the icons in the briefcase. Them those Serbs have a good nose for such things, even in the third generation. The icons looked like the one Grandma Katya had in her *khutta*, only on bigger boards.

I left the briefcase where it was, and took the icons to the washroom where my black "diplomat" case was already waiting for them under the sink in that singled-out compartment, the loot fitted in perfectly. And that's when I felt all the truth of the popular saying about stealing chickens. "But your hands do tremble! Been stealing chickens, eh?"

My fingers quivered quite uncontrollably; but not the way they shook after the capsizing in the UAZ-66 truck. That tremor had been a kinda shallow one, while in the washroom, my fingers were, like, knocking against each other. That's what sacrilege brings about... I didn't care for the finger-prints. Ilya would not go to the criminal investigation, "Please, check for the traces on my briefcase where I kept the icons from a robbed temple." However, taking the catch directly to Veerich's was not correct. So, I asked Eera to keep my briefcase at home for a couple of days, she was on a sick leave at the moment.

Then, like an exemplary student, I attended the classes and, already after the canteen, climbed up to the third floor in the Hosty where I was met by a noisy commotion in the corridor, the Lipes' digs had been broken in!

I approached his room and saw that, yes, the door was indeed in need of repair. Dirty bastards! And what's missing?

Ilya never responded and only kept tut-tutting in bitter frustration…

~ ~ ~

But then I decided to finally break up with Eera because I was fed up with all that heartbreaking harrowing... Moreover, because she absolutely didn't trust me and that's for sure.

The watchwoman in the Hosty's lobby passed me a letter:

"Sehrguey,

I have been fascinated by you for so long, but I dared not say it.

Today I'll be waiting for you at 19.00 near the Old Building.

Lyouba"

That evening, as usual, I escorted Eera to the staircase-entrance vestibule in her apartment block, and there she unexpectedly caught some fire of unrestrained passion, “Do not go, hang on a little more, please!" I looked at the watch it was ten to seven, "Well, the guys are waiting at the Hosty. We're fixin' to draw a pool at Pref."

"They can wait. Don't go!"

I hardly managed to leave... When I neared the Old Building it was exactly seven because I had checked the time under a street lamp on the way. And on the square in front of the Old Building, there was no one. But I did not tarry there smoking, waiting, looking around; not at all.

I crossed the empty square without ever stopping; maybe in a bit slower tempo than my usual. But then, after all, I had all the right to admire the nature of the winter night, had I? That Pine tree by the corner looks like a Cedar; could it really be it? In the thicket of close-set branches lives an owl, there, midst them, it's always dark and quiet even at day-time. Look at the snowdrift under the Pine-Cedar, at scattered offals from his feasts, shreds of small rodents; one of the nature sanitizing care-takers...

And, by the by, I didn't lie at all. The moment I entered Room 72, Slavic and Twoic followed me, "Well, will we draw a pool, or will we?"

The letter, as it soon turned out, was written by Eera's girlfriend whose name was not "Lyouba", Eera invented it while dictating to the girl. Everyone may get attracted by the novelty, but it takes a driveling chump to be caught out…

Well, and besides, there appeared Maria, a brunette of the age so ardently canvassed for by the once popular French writer Balzac.

When she smiled at me on the sidewalk, I did not immediately snap in. As it turned out, she happened to drop for a minute to that she-ox's birthday, only I did not notice when. So, in general, she told me what apartment-block she lived in and her apartment number – 42.

Although having a rather busy next day I still slotted a visit to the new acquaintance and also found money for a bottle of vodka which I carried using Alimosha’s trick – in the sleeve; it made for such a hard bicep. So I came to the said address, the fourth floor, the door to the left. She opened.

We had a little snack and landed on the sofa... I do hate coming on entering or almost so which happens at times, the scorch-hot trickle's bored thru, the floodgate burst, your standard pleasure quota past salvage. Fuck!

"Sorry," says I, " In a dreadful hurry. There's a concert at five."

Which concert? Where?. In short, she also came to the Old Building Assembly Hall and was sitting in the second row, when from the stage, and already playing the bass guitar, and already as the leading vocalist, I was screaming,

"Do you remember those two sta-a-rs?!

That disappeared from the sky?!.."

A third-year student, Vitya Kononevich, played the rhythm guitar and sang along, backing with a third; and on the drums some, well, Lyosha, it seems, also from that course, a local guy he was.

After the concert, Maria and I had a walk. She led me to a friend of hers. The woman brought a mug of medicinal alcohol out to the staircase landing, and a piece of fish for a snack. It was 96 percent medicinal alcohol because my tongue at once stuck to the palate. But since then our go-rounds with Maria in their duration were not inferior to the acts in Shakespeare's plays...

She had a son, sixth-grader, who I never met in her one-room apartment. Apart from the sofa, there was a double bed and a radio receiver on the nightstand next to it. All night long it was playing softly to itself in the middle waves ranges, glowing with its small yellow eyelet.

And she cum in really grand style, "More! More! A! I wanna.. Mo-o-ore! A!." Maybe it was her worked out coda, but still a cool one. She didn't condone the semen smell and asked me to go to the bathroom right away. I did not mind, she was worth it. For my willingness, she rewarded me with a massage, so was her profession. I couldn't get it why they were so crazy about it. Oh, massage!. But I did not contradict even on that point…

Sometimes, even way too late at night, the doorbell rang. She rose from the bed, threw on her long gown and went out to the landing to have a word with the untimely visitor. I was not quibbling, I understood that a nurse, even a masseuse, had somehow to survive in this world. She had a beautiful body, like in black-and-white pics of Soviet amateur pornography against the backdrop of filled up ash-trays and empty bottles on the kitchen windowsill, and she herself was good-looking too, in that Transcarpathian style. But she seldom took off her nightgown in bed, if at all, she said there was a breast problem, mastitis, or something.

And after ramming into way too many "eager-top-unsurrenderable-downs" that felt even refreshing for a change. More so because she knew how to use her lower parts. "And may I do it that way?" And she would get unleashed in such a "way" which I never imagined possible, and had not even dreamed of. Yes, you may and welcome all the way!

When dropping to Room 72, she skillfully used the scanty furniture set there... In between having a sex we were on genuinely friendly terms. She shared her plans for buying me a pair of slippers, and promised to cure would I catch a venereal disease. She told me…

Well, it doesn't matter though, or else I will never finish, like after a mug of medicinal alcohol, sort of. In a word, I wanna say, Balzac was not a fool, albeit a Frenchman…

~ ~ ~

At the May Day demonstration, willing or not, you had to carry the portrait of one or another member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the privilege rooted in

your being one of just 4 boys at your course. After airing the member over the main square in the institute's columns, it still had to be taken to the Old Building and handed over to House Manager.

When I was leaving the House Manager storeroom, Slavic warned me that he saw Eera in front of the Old Building, and she asked him where I was. Slavic knew that I had broken up with her for over a month already, that's why he warned.

The separation was painful for me. The evenings stretched endlessly long without her voice over the telephone. And I was missing her German-like gait from afar... Seeing her occasionally in the institute corridors, I got it over and over again that there was no one as beautiful as her, and my heart tightened bitterly. But still and all I had to be firm and put the final period, after all…

So, to avoid an unbearably painful encounter, I decided to sit tight in the Old Building until she left. Moreover, the day before while on a country outing, Maria and I arranged to spend May Day at her place…

For the outing, we went to the station, and, in the bright rays of the sunset, walked along the path by the tracks to the forest on the outskirts. On the way, we met a couple of workmen. One of them started to yap, but I just ignored the bumpkin – anyone would envy when you walk so a juicy beauty to the wood, while the nightingales around tear themselves apart in so vigorous trills that stand upright like one solid wall of sound...

We found a clearing among the trees, and in the gathering darkness, I built a fire. It was very warm, she even took off her cloak. We did not have glasses for the wine brought along... "More! A! More!.."

The bonfire was already burnt out, and screening for a sec the iridescent glow from its coals, some dark shadow rushed across the clearing. A homeless dog. How he scared her!

There is nothing more appealing than a freaked out woman, and you, a kinda epic knight, protectively embrace her shoulders. And your stud feels like a ride... "More! Mo-ore!. A!."

We were returning already in the middle of night and had to wait for long at the stop for the last bus carrying workers from the defense plant Progress after their second shift. Or rather, female workers, there were only women on the bus giving Maria way too hostile looks. Like, we were slaving like damned, while that slut horsed around with her cuntfucker. In spring even females grow intolerant and bitchy…

That is to say, that I did not need that meeting with Eera and I waited for another 20 minutes before I left the Old Building.

"Sehryozha!" She still waited between the massive columns on the high porch.

Well, what can I do if she's so beautiful? If I have to keep in check my breath, hold my heart back from leaping out?. We walked round the corner bypassing the marble plaque "Here N. V.

Gogol studied in...", and stopped beneath one of the tall XIX-century windows overhead. I was appalled by the wanness of her face, not sickly pallid though but like the pure white of exquisite, almost transparent, porcelain. And I couldn't tell what clamped my heart in a mightier grip – her beauty or my pity for her.

What a witless brute I've been, torturing both her and myself for so long, and so savagely! At last, I am embracing her again. She both laughs and cries in my chest. O, how I love her!.

That cursed month she was coming home and just lay down prostrate overwhelmed by the pain felt verbatim physically, and nothing mattered, absolutely nothing. Mommy did not know what to do, "What's wrong with you, Eera?"

"Nothing."

Stupid beast! Bastard! How pale she is! How desperately beautiful. "Come on to the Hosty. The room is vacant."

She happily hurried home to change and tell her mother that she was celebrating and staying overnight at a girlfriend's.

> (...most of all in the Soviet holidays I liked the calm condensing after demonstrations... The streets got void of traffic and pedestrians; people retired to their homes, start celebrating...)

The hostel was also empty. Except for Room 72 on the third floor. That was our room, our hostel, our celebration. The Feast of Reconciliation…

Sveta might nigh spoil the feast... Taking advantage of the vacuum in the silent corridor of locked doors, I ventured to the toilet in my underpants and on the way back I dropped into the washroom. It was there that Sveta screwed me over, "What's that!"

And she began to talk my ear off that she'd never put up with any personnel extension without preliminary coordination. She was forgiving me Eera, forgiving Maria, but who was that new slut in my room?

"Are you crazy? That's Eera!"

Well, she had just peeped in and there was someone standing by the window. Where could Eera possibly get such a cute nightie from?

As if I knew; I saw it for the first time too…

On the second day, I left the Hosty in the morning. The big deli in the main square was stormed by the crowd after a rare deficit: white-and-blue cans of condensed milk.

Proud of my hunting skills, I returned to Room 72 and Eera greeted me from the bed by the window, "Wow! You brought condensed milk?" I was f-f.. well, I mean, flabbergasted. "You… what the… er… that is, how?"

"You had such a swagging nose, anyone could read it."

And possessing such skills to write counterfeit letters? There was something, not that there... In short, I surrendered, and we started to live on together as one tightly united family. In learned books, they call such life-style polygamy in which I was the joining link, sort of.

> (...the joining link should master and keep to one golden rule – no names. "Darling" is the very thing, it sounds pleasant and causes no misunderstandings.
>
> Maybe someone would pull for "kitty" or "bunny", which is a matter of taste, but, in my humble opinion, why to start up a superfluous menagerie?
>
> "Yes, darling..."
>
> "Come on, darling...")

Sveta did not kick up unneeded dust anymore. She clearly knew her exact place – after Eera, before Maria. Officially, the girls were not introduced but knew about the existence of the rest. Eera and Sveta, for sure, and Maria, most likely, as well.

Talking to the darlings, I was not especially keen on that topic – who knows what about who, but Nezhyn was a provincial town where everyone knew everything about everyone else... When in the third year, I had a pedagogical practice at School 2 and once at the break a teacher of theirs started divulging a kinda disparaging information about Maria. When at it, she carefully kept her eyes off me addressing exclusively my course-mate who also practiced at that school.

That tootsy of my course-mate was a very studious student, and she took lots of pains when preparing for her first lesson at that practice. At home, she collected all her dolls and puppets and arranged them in a row seated upon the piano lid, so as to get properly prepared, "Good morning, children! Who is on duty today?."

> (...infantilism is a lethal weapon for me, more dreadful than a machine gun. I mean, it makes me wanna puke...)

But the newlywed couple on our floor in the Hosty were well matured. After their marriage, they got a whole room for themselves. The students living there before were moved to other rooms, only the furniture remained.

At times, to relax after intense mental work in their educational process, they arranged "races" on Saturdays. A couple of other students from the floor were invited then for the overnight stay, and after the dinner they started the "race" heats with the change of partners. I do not know the

details though, I did not participate in those races, Vitya Kononevich was the principal jockey there...

> (...honestly, if you ask me, having a sex is something just for two. It is of so intimate a nature that even a condom doesn't fit well in between the lovers.
>
> No arguing, I'm fairly old-fashioned on this point but there's nothing doing about it, that is my innate quality...)

~ ~ ~

In summer, I was passing my pioneer practice at the camp "The Young Construction Worker" near the town of Sednev. At the times of Chernigov Princedom there stood a mighty fortress for defense from Tatars, Lithuanians, or Novgorodians – whoever would come to plunder. And now of all the fortress there remained just one tower. From the tower, a steep winding descent led down to the bridge connecting the sandy banks of the Snov river. After the bridge, you got into a small pinewood with two pioneer camps, side by side: "The Young Construction Worker" and "The Young Chemist", and then followed the boundless vistas of wheat fields...

My trainee position at the camp was that of a substitute caretaker. That meant that when the caretaker of some platoon went to Chernigov, I was to oversee the on-duty kids from her platoon laying tables in the canteen for breakfast, midday meal, tea, and supper, and if on that day the camp was taken out to the river, I had to watch that the platoon's pioneers did not splash outside the iron grating but only within the fenced part of the calm flow.

Going to Chernigov was not so easy because of transportation problems, and caretakers seldom went there. So, my remaining job was to switch on the music in the radio-unit room broadcasting thru the camp loudspeakers, and also to announce on the microphone the "dead-hour" and "lights-out". I don't know why, but those announcements I gave out with the feline drawl of a fag, "Attayntion! Leets-ouwt for thee camp!."

The radio-unit was installed in the room of the senior pioneer leader, partitioned from a small gymnasium whose only equipment was one bed on which I slept. The door in the far wall of the gym opened onto the stage of a small open-air auditorium bounded by Pine trees.

I was kicking back, and reading what would turn up in the camp library, and growing my beard because after the camp I was going to work with the student construction platoon of the NGPI. In short, I was wallowing in the life of reprobate unshaven renegade...

The position of senior pioneer leader was filled with my course-mate, Irina from Bakhmuch. I somehow did not immediately realize that she was courting me, until her invitation to the ancient tower of Sednev with its tiny built-in romantic restaurant.

The loopholes in the thick (of about a meter-and-a-half) walls opened to the fleeing shadows from summer clouds racing by, over the plain far below, like a horde of raiding robbers... She treated me to the blackberry liqueur, yet I did not like that over-sweetened cloying swill.

After two years of studying at the pedagogical institute, Irina obviously re-evaluated the standpoints and priorities entertained by her during the night which we spend together when being first-year students. However, I couldn't respond to her advances in a natural way. Not because of being a vengeful jackass, "aha! you didn't give it then, so go without now!" No, it's not like me. The reason was my dutiful submissiveness to the received instructions. When said "no", I retreat obediently, but in order for me to get at it again, there should be an explicit invitation "come on, let’s do it". She pinned her hopes on the liqueur alone which was not straightforward enough...

And I also couldn't concentrate on the other trainee, one more Irina, but already from Nezhyn, the daughter of Pro-Rector Budowski. Firstly, I disliked both his bald head and his moral character in general, and secondly, she was an unmistakable virgin.

Consequently, the champion laurels in the contest, quite predictably and inevitably, went to the blonde sports trainer, again Irina, from the adjacent "The Young Chemist" camp. At first, we had dates on the riverbank in the company of her "Spidola" receiver, but in my gym, it was much warmer...

Once I entertained a group of visitors comprising Slavic, Twoic, and Petyunya for playing Preferans, and Sveta for everything else.

After the game, the boys started racing around the gym after the hedgehog brought to me by pioneer kids earlier on that day. I asked them to stop molesting the poor creature, and they switched over to voyeuristic eavesdropping to the erotic arias sounding from the partition to the radio-unit room, where Irina from Bakhmuch entertained a guest who visited her on the same day, also a Bakhmuch guy.

Then I gave the boys a bundle of camp cloth blankets to soften their sleep on the bare floorboards and turned off the light. Sveta, who had the legitimate right to a part of my bed, performed from that elevation before the 3, frozen in awe and admiration, music lovers on the floor, a concert for a flute without an orchestra…

Another time I went to Nezhyn, sort of a day off, but there I behaved like a disgusting swine. I swallowed too much of pills, and dining in the canteen room at the station I almost dozed off over the bowl of borshch, as if it was a kinda pillow. Naturally, Eera got outraged and left. Slavic, who was also going to Chernigov, had to drag me, like a vegetable, into the diesel train. Because the branch line to Chernigov was not electrified... Traveling by the diesel train, I slept off but still remained bored utterly because everything was so dull…

I felt like that for the most time of that practice. So dull and unnecessary was my lie to a mujik in the fields, who asked which camp I belonged to. Why did I say I was from "The Chemist"?

And it was dull when a pack of youngsters from Chernigov came to the Pine forest by the daddy's Volga of some of them. They kicked up thief-swaggering and one of them pulled out a big handsome dagger, I looked around for a stick, although he obviously wanted to get relieved

of the weapon. A split-second of delay, the moment was lost and the trophy went to the chauffeur of the camp. Well done, mujik!

And because of being bored and off-hand, when diving in the river from the bluff I, like, dislocated something in my back and a couple of days was turning to the sides with my whole body.

Taking a swim at night was dull as well, even after some car drove on the bank flashing the headlights at the girls, who had already changed their mind to enter the river, and I had to get out of the water in the altogether, just as I had come to this world, armed only with a distorted expression of the unshaven face. It's hard to say what aboriginal mask my mug looked like at that moment, but they switched off the headlights. The next day Irina from Bakhmuch was making sport of my cock size not living up visually to her expectations. It did not hurt my feelings though because everything was so dull and boring...

"A vain present, a chance present,

Why are you given to me, Life?."

Yet, when on Poseidon Day the pioneers of both camps united in catching and dragging me along to drop into a pond by the river, it was not boring, it was right. At first, I felt offended and wet, but then like laughing. Well done, kids! Serves good the bastard!.

The last night at the camp, Irina the trainer and I once again sat on the river bank. There were so many stars that you could hardly see the sky behind them, and I had blues that everything was somehow flowing away and getting lost. She, for some reason, did not want to have a sex, and we just sat leaning our backs against each other. The stars were glittering both from below—reflected in the silent flow of the Snov—and also from above. They crowded everywhere and would always be and still it was impossible to keep them. Everything flows away...

Probably, I had blues because of the "Spidola" was babbling a sermon in English. I did not understand at all what all that was about, because it was not the English Department Language Laboratory texts about the family of Parkers, but you could guess that it was a sermon.

Then I escorted Irina to "The Young Chemist". She went in and locked the gate, but I called her again. We climbed the grating of the gate from both sides and had the final kiss, a camp kiss atop of the grates. Forgive me and goodbye, my loss…

~ ~ ~

I knew the city of Pryluky for a long time, yet in absentia. The cigarette packs of Prima acquainted me with the city's name printed on their back, "cigarette factory m. Pryluky." During the years of German occupation, the city of Pryluky was drastically rebuilt, so the streets in it became strictly parallel and methodically perpendicular to each other. Except for the outskirts where the bus station was built later...

Commander of the student construction platoon was Vladimir Maiba, from the Physics and Mathematics Department. The platoon's Commissar was Igor, a Ukrainian nationalist, who suspected Maiba of being a secret collaborator with the KGB and, therefore, was constantly jeering at him and discrediting his authority in every possible way. And I was Leading Specialist, sort of, because in my military ID they advertised me as a "bricklayer".

Besides the mentioned commanding staff, there were 2 girls and 15 guys in the platoon. In the city we stayed at a hostel of "chemists" but just for one night and the next morning, we had to leave for Auto-Depot 4 located by the nearby highway between the Ivkovtsy village and the town of Ladan.

"Chemists" was the general term for convicts who, because of their supposedly good behavior, were paroled from Zona to finish off their time "at the chemistry". Any plant or a factory with production lines hazardous to health, or a mine, or a construction site usually served "the chemistry" grounds for paroled *zeks*. The regulations for "chemists" were pretty strict. They should be present in the hostel no later than the hour specified, never get drunk, nor bring whores and abide by many other restrictions. However, they were not locked and controlled by the turnkeys and did not sleep in the common dormitory. They even got some payment though decimated by their curator militiaman who decided whether they remain on parole or get remanded back to Zona...

After the shower, I and Igor, who, regardless of his being a Ukrainian nationalist, spoke a very good Russian and dreamed of moving to St. Petersburg, the cultural capital, went out to check the geometrical correctness of Pryluky.

"Katranikha! I am damned! Is that you?"

"Don't shout! Some of my students may be around. I'm a teacher here."

Well, of course, sorry, how could I forget myself. For one year already she was disseminating there the seeds of the wisdom, of kindness, and values eternal…

Auto-Depot 4 was all by itself, neither in a village nor in a town, just behind the trees in windbreak belt along the highway roadside. First, there stood an old two-story building. On the first floor it had some locked warehouses, and on the second floor, there was a spacious hall with beds for students of the construction platoon plus a small room for the 2 girls by it. Then there followed a one-story stoker-house and, still farther, the vast grounds of Auto-Depot 4 behind the tall red-brick wall surrounding a dozen of garages, a canteen, and many other buildings, some of which still under construction, and in the middle of the grounds, there stretched the wide and deep foundation pit. Lots of steel wires crisscrossed the air above the pit. Plumb under the intersections of the spanned wires, our platoon had to assemble formworks and fill them with concrete to produce the "cups" for the insertion of support columns. But all that was to be done later and for the start, there were shovels to exercise "dig-dump". Everything was so nostalgic familiar, and only the uniform was different.

After a working day, the stoker-"chemists", Yura and Tomato, opened the respective valve inside their stoker-house and from an outside pipe, sticking out high up on the wall, there gushed a broad horizontal jet of water falling to the ground about 20 meters off the wall. You could stand there and take a shower, pretty chilly, sure thing, but it was summertime around, right?.

A week later Commander of the platoon called a general meeting. The agenda of one issue – feeding the platoon contingent, because the food in the canteen was just a...

(...well, I don't know, that same *havvage* as anywhere else...)

The meeting approved – to cook food of our own resources procured for money borrowed by Commander from the Auto-Depot foreman in advance, on account of our future labor achievements. From now on the girls' position was not only that of paramedics but cooks as well...

Each evening, as it got dark, in twos or threes, we went on a raid to the potato field of the nearby collective farm. Sweeping along the way whatever looking good enough.

"A fiery construction platoon

Hot as the steppe fire!."

The students paid compliments to the cooking skills of the Phys-Math girls. Well, I don't know, yes, on the whole, it was hotter than in the canteen, but otherwise the same *havvage* as anywhere else…

A couple of times we went to dances in the village of Ivkovtsy by the water-tanker truck, manned by a young driver. The girls were traveling in the cab, the rest of us wherever they could grab hold at the iron cistern of the truck... We danced to the hits of Leshchenko:

"From the fields, the sadness flees away,

The anxiety also hits the road,

And the vistas wide unfold ahead..."

After the dances, we whizzed back thru the breeze and the darkness, everyone hugging closely his piece of the steely cistern…

Once for the midday break and meal, we visited the nearby city of Ladan. When translated into English, "ladan" becomes "incense" with all connotations to it. But I also presented the view of manifold meaning with that curly beard and hair hanging to the shoulders from under the twisted gauze bandage the color of earth to keep it from falling into the eyes. You couldn't make it out at a glance who was that – an excommunicated priest or Rambo from black-and-white photos.

However, when Rambo in the central nosh-bar of Ladan demanded a bottle of white to be served in a half-liter beer glass in one go, everything fell in place – a drunk from Auto-Depot 4!

I come back from Ladan with a pleasantly slackened thirst only to find Sasha Chalov, a third-year student from the English Department, in our dorm, who arrived from Pryluky, his native city, together with a friend of his and a briefcase bulging with ammo.

The Sun in the Tumbler

Gee!. The ours did learn, after all, turning out poetic stickers for ornery swill!. Adding that Sun on top of the prosaic berry&fruit from Ladan necessitated catching a breath. I was preparing for a peaceful repose among the bushes of the windbreak belt, but would those so-called bros allow you to breathe? Sasha and his chum tore me away from our mutual Earth-Mommy, dragged to the second floor and dropped onto the bed there. Some fucking lot of comradely solicitude it was! I had to throw up and out from the second-floor window like that jet from the wall in the stoker-house…

In fact, they came in need of a bass guitarist for "playing trash" at weddings in the city of Pryluky. So, the following two weekends we serviced two nuptials, yet both for free because the newlyweds were lucky enough to be relatives of that Sasha's chum, so it turned just toiling for grub.

Getting wiser, for the second wedding I brought 3 students from the Physics and Mathematics Department along with me, like, indispensable sound engineers…

~ ~ ~

The handle "Tomato" suited the stoker-"chemist" perfectly because his face had red skin and his hair was of natural orange color. He was the most joyful "chemist" in the world. Having his skills at sharping cards, I'd also walk my life shedding benevolent blessing smile on all four. After shuffling the deck, he dealt hands with eight tricks in hearts for himself. Though fully aware that he was stacking the deck, you could not follow how...

In the excavated foundation pit we worked incompetently but with enthusiasm until, at the end of the month, the foreman presented the work orders for our labor. By his calculations, after deduction of the paid advance, our payment per worker equaled to the student monthly scholarship of 45 rubles. At that moment Auto-Depot 4 ran out of nails, and we had nothing to assemble the formworks with any more. The enthusiasm dried up completely because of the grim prospect of sitting idly for the final 10 days doing no job, during which period our food expenses would eat away the pittance we had earned.

The student construction platoon sent a negotiating team for talks with Director of Auto-Depot 4. The delegation consisted of me and one of the two paramedic-cook girls who did not understand a fig either in construction works or nails for carpentering, but she was a blonde, which quality imparts the right angle to the process of any negotiations... The chief engineer we met at the management office disclosed that Director was not around, harvesting crops in the fields of the

patronized collective farm. Good news that a truck with spare parts was leaving soon for the patronizers' field camp, which could also take us along. If there were no blondes in the delegation, he hardly would mention the truck which he himself was driving with the blonde seated in the cab, between him and me...

I was surprised by his knack at recognizing the Auto-Depot 4 vehicles on the highway long before their number plates became discernible. The chief engineer explained that he saw them by their horns, and asked if I knew Tshombe.

Of course, I knew Tshombe who machine-gunned Patrice Lumumba when I was still a pioneer. However, I could not figure out any connection between the trucks rushing in the opposite direction along the sunlit highway and the dictator from I could not recollect which African country, because I was still a pioneer then. So, I denied any acquaintance and said, no, I did not know him.

The chief engineer explained that Tshombe was Auto-Depot 4 Director to whom we were riding now. This Tshombe of a director ordered the radiators of all the vehicles in Auto-Depot 4 to be marked with white paint to produce a large Roman digit V. The marks were visible from afar and, in the opinion of the drivers, resembled horns. The drivers cursed Tshombe's meanness because such marks added complexity to going on their contingent runs. However, Director himself was Tshombe even before the Depot vehicles acquired the horns…

Director was not in the field camp made up of four big trailers; they said he was reaping another field. The chief engineer with the brought spare parts and the blonde stayed by the trailers, and I went to Tshombe. The brand new water tanker of the UAZ-66 make was driven by a ten-year boy, the Director's son...

Wrapped in the thick cloud of dust, a brown harvester with the white inscription "Niva" on its side was circling about a yellow sun-smitten field. I went to meet it but the harvester rumbled by, and I had to run after, and jump onto the short ladder that led to the inclined cab of the machine. The harvester roared and pounded on in its ride thru the dust. For the first time in my life I had climbed aboard such a juggernaut, but everything went on intuitively – here's the ladder, that's the door...

In the narrow cabin, a man in a workman cap sat with his back to me and watched thru the glass of the tilted windshield how his combine fell and drew in jagged portions of the cut-down wheat shoots. I slammed the door, cutting off the knock in the bunker behind my back, and joined staring at the shags of ears crawling-up the harvester conveyor belt, while reporting to the top of his cap that our platoon sat jobless, nails were over and we wouldn't earn a kopeck. The engine rumbled, the cut shoots twitched, collapsed onto the wide rotating shaft and flowed, in rared bunches, up the belt. Director never turned around but answered that he would see what could be done, and let the chief engineer come to see him.

I got out of the cab into the cloud of dust about the bunker, climbed down the ladder and jumped off. Having seen neither the face nor the skin color of the man I had talked to, I still felt that some dictators were worthy of respect…

Back at the field camp, they called us into the trailer with a long table for the midday meal. Such a dinner does not fall under the category of *havvage*, it was some really cheerful chow. The cook in his camouflaged by layers of grease, but otherwise white, jacket splashed half-dipper of sore cream into a huge enamel bowl and filled it over with red steaming borshch. A big piece of boiled meat was put on top. On transferring the bowl's content into me, I got filled to the brim.

For the second course, the cook served golden balls of fried young potatoes in the veil of dill, then poured with meat sauce. Absolutely delicious, but having no room for the additional treat, I finished it off only for principle's sake.

The compote seemed a glut excess, yet I managed to poured it, gradually, in.

With thanks for the meal, I rose and very very carefully ascended the steps in the front porch. Reaching the ground, I unbuckled my belt and walking the gait of parted dividers proceeded to the garden at the field edge. There I gradually laid me down on an armful of dry hay under an Apple tree, in the hope that maybe I still would not explode. Somehow.

And so it happened! By the time the blonde came into the garden, I felt normal. She sat under the same Apple tree, leaned her back on the trunk and smiled at me her sweet inviting smile.

I was amazed by the exact coincidence in the scenic design – a garden around her and me below the Apple tree, and only Serpent was skipping the picture. And, with warm tenderness, I began to think of Eera and pride myself for keeping staunchly truthful. Because I abstained from falling in the usual groove and going along with the flow despite all too ingratiating conditions for the purpose – the bed of hay in the Apple-tree shade in the Garden of Eden conveniently supplied by the blonde…

The next morning saw me, and the chief engineer, and a long tape measure marking out the projected walls of two inspection holes in the boxes under construction. Tshombe did find what to keep us busy with...

A couple of days before the completion of the term at the construction platoon, Sasha Chalov popped up at the Auto-Depot 4 on no particular purpose, just to drink the sun in the tumbler. Giving a tender jerk to his briefcase he, as was his custom, recited his favorite quatrain:

" One won't sound at all

And two won't jingle this way

When people of such quality

Live in the Soviet land!"

From the poetry standpoint, the piece sucked more than absolutely, yet in the same breath, conveyed an optimistic message, inspiring and bright. The stoker-"chemists” helped to sort out the contents of the portfolio, which made one bottle for a snout and soon after the consumption, Sasha Chalov left.

It was already late, so Tomato and Yura also steered to their stoker-house but, on the way, they knocked on the door of the girls' room. It happened to be locked. They knocked again and then, carried away with the recollections of their happy school days and themselves—adolescent hooligans—they started cutting capers around the locked door. Some paper slips were lit to burn and shoved in the gap under the door. The girls defended their safety pouring, from inside, water from their kettle.

In the background was I, stretched out on my bed, producing a soundtrack of hue and cry. A sudden rage against the whole female tribe flushed me, like, because of them all was so boring and awry that I myself did not know what I needed. So, I lay there yelling the most disgusting things.

Were the door open from the very beginning, the "chemists" would simply get in and out, but now they were burning with hunting ardor. Under the sword of Damocles of getting sent back to Zona, they surely had no intention to jeopardize their present conditions, they were just having fun.

However, the poor girls in the besieged room were not up to all these logical operations or seeing any fun at all, when a pair of convicts were attacking their door, under my instigating, idiotic, shrieks from the common bedroom, "Bitches! Wolf whores!" Finally, one of the guys from their Phys-Math course approached my bed and said that it was not right. I shouted to the stokers that that was enough, and Tomato with Yura faded in the woodwork right away; "chemists" have no problems concerning logic.

Next morning I knocked on the door to the girls' room. It was not locked. I entered and apologized for the previous night. "Afraid of expulsion from the institute?" asked the one with the brown hair.

Hardly would she believe that I was just ashamed. Even less, could I bring it over to her that I did not know exactly whether I was afraid or wanted to be sent down...

> (...looking back brings not too much fun because of frequent temptation to spit in your own face. However, the truth remains true only when it's unvarnished, and all that shit is also me...)

~ ~ ~

Since I earned some kopecks at the student construction platoon, I bought a doll for Lenochka. Of course, I wouldn't be smart enough to do it, but the All-Union radio station "Mayak" for at least thrice a day aired the most popular hit of season:

"Daddy, present me,

Daddy, present me,

Daddy, present me

With a doll!."

And during a day that hit would get you someplace or another and start to spin on and on in your brains even without the radio around until—click!—hey, that's an idea! So I went to the Department Store after a doll, but there were no dolls.

It wouldn't be right to always blame the era of shortages. It's no era's fault if good ideas pop up in the mind of a certain dolt when it's too late already... So I had no other choice but to buy a dog of the biggest available size with the price answering the proportions. The brute was no less than a meter tall, rigged out in trousers and a shirt. The same, practically, doll, only with a canine head…

Lenochka grew a healthy child, and she attended the big kindergarten "Sunny" not too far from home, in the apple orchard alongside May Day Street. All September, I was taking her to "Sunny" and coming after her at the end of the day, because those who worked at the student construction platoon were exempt from the patronage assistance to collective farms.

My beard was shaved off but I kept the hair long. Once I and my brother went to dances together. Sasha Basha had already replaced The Spitzes at the Loony dance-floor.

My brother had served his two-year hitch at the Baikonur cosmodrome and because of that he lost any chance of going out of the country for 20 years. Even visiting the resorts of socialist Bulgaria was out of the question to make sure he wouldn't blurb out to a chance CIA spy sunbathing on a beach that at the Baikonur, besides the astronauts, all kinds of test ballistic missiles were launched every week unnoticeable to all those spy satellites orbiting above us in 3 layers already...

Starting off to the Loony, I put my "Mona-Lisa" sunglasses on. You'd hardly need to wear sunglasses in the evening, but the "Mona-Lisa" in its thin golden rim was commonly viewed as the swanky symbol of a dandy dude of fashion as well as the jeans losing their blue dye with wear. Such jeans were pushed over for 120-150 rubles, which was more than an average workman salary. The mainstream trafficking of jeans to Konotop was operated by well-tanned Algerians who studied at the Engineering Technical School on Peace Avenue.

By the by, those Algerians were so naive. "He said-a come-a go out and talk-a. I come-a out, he kick-a me a kick. Why-a?" But for all their naivety, they never scaled the jeans price down.

And my jeans were bought for just 30 rubles and that what they looked, some Brazilian crap never fading with washing, nothing like Lyalka's "Levi's". Therefore, although it's hard to see

thru sunglasses in the evening, they justified themselves on the dance-floor, veiling the misery in jeans...

To the dance-floor, my brother and I arrived after the break when the crowd crammed the place to the utmost. Sasha went around looking for his girlfriend, and I pulled up nigh the stage and remained there listening; Basha's guitarist, Marik, was good at solo riffs.

Then some *salabon* buster came up and gazed at me. Well, quite understandable too, got impressed with such a hippy-long hair, the "Mona-Lisa", and my metropolitan air in general. So, he stared for a while and got lost in the crowd.

I stood where I was and in a couple of minutes—good evening to your *khutta*!—the same buster popped up but already with his buddy. They approached me and, synchronously so, swayed back and—whoosh!—two fists were flying at me. I parried them with my shoulder but the collective impact of the double blow slammed me off and I, like, flew into some parallel space.

I mean it – it was a completely different dimension, as if under the sea. The sound of the dances instantly turned off and I was gliding or, rather, spinning along the concrete floor. From all the sides in that mute space around, lots of legs rushed towards me, each one all too eager to kick. And those legs were somehow not complete but, sort of, cutouts, from feet and up to knees, no higher. So they whooshed by from here and there, only soundlessly, missing to inflict bodily harm.

I yanked me up and jumped onto the bench by the circular grating and pressed my back to its pipes. That’s when the sound came back, the shrieks of girls and Basha's preaching on the microphone, "Friends, please, observe..." And round the bench, a pack of guys stood facing me and one of them, such a hefty slob, yelled, "Who're you? Who're you? Take off your glasses!."

I pulled the "Mona-Lisa" off and someone shouted, "From The Orpheuses!" They obviously were Settlement guys although I did not even know them.

So, they yanked me off the bench into their tight circle and warped out of the dance-floor, and they at once went back to the general sorting out in progress. On that day the blades from Depot Street attempted at staking off the Loony as their sovereign turf.

At the park exit, I met my brother with his brow broken. We had to go to the Station for him to wash the blood off under the tap in the men's room…

To mark the most obvious things is the hardest of tricks. I had been raiding weed plantations as far as the Kandeebynno itself, while in the neighbor's garden, right over the fence splitting our plots, there grew a dense coppice of cannabis. That's what a limited outlook means. I was looking into the distance and couldn't see under my very nose. The situation called for the restoration of historical justice which I did at night and, to cover the tracks, heaved the weed looted from the neighbor's garden over his fence to the next lane, and from there back, round the

corner, to our wicket and up to the attic in the shed... The quality of tested samples was simply excellent. I shared some part of the booty with Lyalka for him to get on high, and feel that not for nothing he was warming me up in those two years…

You strike a lode and there comes another. In Nezhyn, in the plot by an inconspicuous *khutta* in the Count's Park, right across the road from the Leninist Komsomol cinema, there stood 5 ample bushes of weed without any fencing whatsoever. No saint would pass by and withstand the temptation...

But then there arose a serious problem: how to store the abundant harvest? To keep it under the bed in the Hosty?. Very funny, indeed.

I walked around all of the hostel looking for a suitable nook but in vain. And then in the washroom on the fourth floor, I saw a desk with a drawer. I did not know how came it was there, or for how long it would tarry in the washroom, but being desperately pressed for finding any storage place (I couldn't just leave the weed in the park with the rains setting in, couldn't I?) I just dumped it in the drawer. As a precaution measure, I turned the desk and pushed it with its drawer close to the wall, so that no one would horse around. Then, as necessary, I was visiting the washroom to pinch off a few heads for the current consumption…

From the patronized collective farm, my course-mates returned in a state of complete shock, dumbfounded, all lost in the deep contemplation about life's purpose, meaning, and requirements. That is, was or was not their former understanding of and approach to those concepts correct? As it turned out, during their patronage assistance 2 of local guys there had a knife fight. Because of whom? Because of Tanya who was studying at my group.

A year before, those ruthless bitches of my course-mates asked me to pretend I fell in love with her. Just for fun, because she was most inarticulate and unattractive. And I—the stupid moose—was quick to execute what asked. "Tanya! I love you with all of the depth! And what is your shared feeling?" For 2 days I pestered her at the breaks until she asked to leave her alone. It looked like she was going to cry, I got ashamed and shut up.

Well, now, how do you like it, ladies? Who was chosen by the guys as the prize for their berserk passion? That's why the girls were now following her with furtive looks of envy and respect. And she walked the corridors with pensive pride as if she got it something about herself which she had never expected. And her glances at me became not as negating as they used to be. What if I had not been just sporting last year? Thank you, dagger guys, for the alibi…

But I still was worried about the cannabis stored in so inappropriate manner. A desk drawer in the washroom was anything but the right place for it. Any block with elementary literacy level on the subject would inevitably get attracted by its poignantly alluring fragrance and deduct the source of the whiff because the desk somehow did not belong among the tiled bare walls and sinks of the washroom. Besides, the Phys-Math students might start to ask themselves unnecessary questions as to why I started to frequent the washroom on their floor.

So with the first snow in November, I took weed out for relocation to another place of storage. My plan was to hide it in the dormer on the Old Building roof because I noted a mighty welded ladder leading up there from behind the building...

Late in the evening, Slavic, Twoic, and Eera accompanied me to the Old Building backyard, like, the state commission at the launch of a manned spaceship from the Baikonur site.

I passed my overcoat and hat to Eera, thrust the package with weed under my shirt and started off... At the initial after-launch stages all went on in a standard mode. The ladder vibrations stayed within the safety gauge, it's only that the iron rungs were icy cold making the lift endless. In the times of Gogol, they built the floors two-three times taller than presently.

At the point of entering the roof, there cropped up unforeseen problems. The ladder did not reach the roof itself, ending under the eaves. It was necessary to catch hold of the tinplate above the ladder and go over its jutting edge onto the roof. Of that moment I recollect the uncompromisingly dark night, in the surrounding void, there were just 3 of us – the tinplate, the darkness and I…

The roof itself was rather slippery, although not overly steep; I had to plant my steps onto the low ridges of seams between the sheet blocks. Getting to the dormer, I found its window sealed tightly with thick planks nailed from within. Thank you for your visit!.

On the way back, I suddenly slipped, when nearing the place where I had to get over the tinplate at the roof edge, yet I did not fall, but straightened up, gnashed my teeth and, addressing myself, spoke up to the darkness, "Tickling the public's expectation, eh? You bitch!" Then I went down on all fours, dangled my legs over the roof edge and groped with my feet for the uppermost rung in the ladder.

Halfway down, I was caught up by the mortifying belated thought that the evaded dive from the roof wouldn't be as bad as crash-landing on someone from the commission in the launch-pad.

(...certain thoughts are better never to be thought at all...)

And again I kicked in a door. Remarkably, it was the same one though Ilya Lipes did not live in that room anymore. It was inhabited by the current fourth-year students and among them Vitya Kononevich, who imprudently borrowed from Zhora Ilchenko *The Godfather*, together with *A Learner's Dictionary of Current English* by Hornby, both imported from India.

How insignificant and trivial, at first glance, might seem the things eventually leading to a real jolt in the flow of life! Say, you ask Zhora to lend you *The Godfather* for a couple of weeks, and then you come to the hostel and see the door of your room kicked brutally in... By the way, this time no shaky fingers were observed, the skills of vital importance get formed surprisingly quickly. Probably, the fact that I was working not for Veerich but for myself had also its telling effect.

The Godfather, a novel by Mario Puzo was stolen not out of idle curiosity (would or wouldn't the action set my fingers a-shaking?), neither for upgrading my door-kicking skills, but just to translate it into Russian. The novel, as well as its author, happened to be rather thick, about 400 pages. With regard to the way of its acquisition, Konotop was a more suitable place for plunging into the translation work.

It took several months of intent labor efforts to render the book turned out at the Penguin Publishing House into a weighty pile of numbered thick notebooks filled with my handwriting, in ink of various hues of the blue. The whole bunch comprising *The Godfather* I passed to Lyalka and his wife Valentina for reading, of the subsequent movements and general fate thereof I am aware no more than of where swam and how fared the cannibal shark from *The Jaws,* also in my Russian handwriting.

In the course of the second translation, about halfway thru towards the completion, my father cooperated by sharing his critical remarks... It happened when working about the passage that described a party in the Hollywood club designed and equipped for the recreational activities of Hollywood movie stars, I experienced certain problems with the rendering of the American English collocation "blow job" into Russian. The descriptive variants seemed over-lengthy, while the shorter options looked outrageously obscene. When in labor pains, I tore another unsuccessful attempt at translation out from the notebook and shoved it into the kitchen stove to be used for kindling.

On coming from work, my father opened the cast-iron door to fill the stove firebox with wood, picked the crushed sheet of paper, smoothed it out and studied the lines before asking, "What fucking hooey is this?"

I did not object to his instant estimation for 2 reasons. Firstly, I knew that passages perceived in the form of printed text as eroticism did look vulgar porn when presented in handwriting. It suffices to recall the thin notebook with a handwritten story, circulating among the senior students at School 13, which contained a passage running as follows "...she threw her legs in fishnet lace up over his collar-bones..." It’s hard to say why, but those fishnet legs were immediately and inseparably associated by me with the Parisian Eiffel Tower. Some pretty uphill job it would be to have a sex (as well as to defend erotica) with the Eiffel Tower bestriding you. On the other hand, who knows how those same legs would sway me if met in the orderly line of typographic set. Appearances influence our judgments.

Secondly, I always respected the subtle literary instinct of my father. Thus, from the newspaper *Trood*, he read only the TV program and, with a fleeting glance at the rest of the headlines, announced his exhaustive conclusion, "Neither rhyme nor reason – kiss a flea in the brick." And he never mistook, crisp and to the point. Besides, he possessed some amazing linguistic ingenuity. Perhaps, because of his Ryazan roots; the land of Ryazan always lay at the crossroads of language contacts.

Well, for example: seated at the kitchen table, with his gray brows taunted strenuously above the plastic rim of his glasses, he's busy a-tinkering to insert some hooey into another one. I cracked along, between the table and the stove, from the door to the window only to take an abrupt turn

back to the door. Without taking his eyes from the hooeys in his hands, the father inquires, "Why tyrtyrting?"

No dictionary would present an entry for the word, yet what a juicy verb it is! Brimming with immensely elastic plasticity! Its sound form alone will let you grasp with utmost precision the action's quintessence, as well as the tense inner state of the poor asshole all in a dither. And—most importantly—the word got born spontaneously, right now, while this fickle hooey doesn't want to enter into the other fucker.

"But could one keep back tyrtyrting when the treppa has pibzed already?!."

Both workpieces drop from his hands onto the table, the father gives me a hard look from over the black plastic rim of the glasses slid halfway down his nose, then he says, "pfui!"

And here lies, by the way, the exhaustive key to the muchly discussed "fathers-and-children" controversy – they reproduce their likes only to pooh-pooh or pfui-pfui when it's too late.

> (...coming back to *The Godfather*…
>
> Unfortunately, there remained no writers in the American literature – Pearson, Salinger, Pynchon and you're plumb at the list bottom. All the rest are scribbling away with their both eyes on selling their production to Hollywood, compilers of cartoon stories and soap opera dialogues.
>
> No! I'm far from blaming them! Not me, not in the least. Basically, we all are like each other and differ in only how deep we manage to keep hidden our hunger to sell us individually. And though being nothing of a Christian, I cannot but admire Mr. J. Christ's instruction, "Let him who never sinned trigger off the slaughter of the slut," by which he wholesomely absolved the motley team of the human race for infinite millenniums to come.
>
> Is there any alternative? Absolutely, yes, and it's all contained in the approbation by which the writer rewards his own efforts in the self-appraisal, "Damn nice artifact! At times, it did amuse me and helped to kill twelve years of my stretch!" which surely won't keep your pot boiling. That's why I'd better head back from so high a curve and once again pick up the literature for a subject.
>
> Look at the Briton Maugham, the very first paragraph in a story by him is a chord, a fugue tuning up. In his first paragraph, among the surface details, he scatters nodules, which will develop and reach their prime in the following narrative and flow into the denouement containing a flutter of echoes from the first paragraph. That's real craftsmanship. Exactly what the Hollywood jacklegs are lacking. My father would say, "Pfui!"
>
> Puzo is the role model from the same and for the same Hollywood writers. He was the first to get a six-figure sum of dollars for his creation, the accountancy pathfinder, yet

his *The Godfather* suffers from the infirmity common to all the action bestsellers: while the protagonists fight for their survival in the unfavorable environment of hostile mafia clans, you can still read it, but with the start of the prize elephant distribution, that is methodical extermination of bad guys whose only slip was leaving a chance for the equally bad guys to outsmart them because of the author's biased sympathies, the interest dwindles rapidly and evaporates.

The same snafu as in the 19th song of *The Odyssey*, when the hero returns home from his wanderings and whacks the suitors of his wife, one by one, with aesthetic relishing of the details in what manner the assholes' brains were smashed or guts were ripped out. I couldn't finish reading the song even in a good Ukrainian translation, not because of being too squeamish but simply getting bored...)

~ ~ ~

I marked him a split-second sooner than he saw me. With our stares fused intently, we were nearing each other on the sidewalk by the Railroad Distance Trade-Union building. Both of us knew that only one would survive. Or no one.

With my lateral sight, I detected the rare figures of passers-by, freaked-out, careful to make room for the invisible line between him and me. Steadily, inexorably we kept making that line shorter. Step by step.

The dwindling distance rendered the forthcoming duel inescapably lethal. His hand darted to his right hip, but no sooner his palm touched the handle of his Smith & Wesson than my Colt erupted in a series of shots blended in a thundering staccato... If you are going to survive in Konotop, you have to be the first to draw.

His hands flapped up to clutch his bullet-riddled chest. In unsteady sway, he careened over the spiky line of the ruthlessly short-shorn bushes bordering the lawn upon which he would collapse the very next moment. I thrust my Colt back into the holster, he straightened up, and we embraced.

"Kuba!"

"Gray!"

The passers-by kept bypassing us along the sidewalk... Yes, that's him – Kuba. Grinning with the gold, that had replaced his teeth lost at the bar brawls in faraway ports of the oversea wanderings, but this was him – Kuba.

"How d'you?"

It's strange that everybody changes—they grow fat, they grow bald—but for your old friends. Fleeting eye contact works a miracle, you no longer see scars, or false teeth or any other distracting trifles. You see your friend Kuba with whom you have had bike rides to the

Kandeebynno or the Seim, attended Children Sector, rode the "sausage" of a streetcar. It's just that now Kuba has what to tell about the life of seamen plowing the World Ocean…

We are sitting at Kuba's. His old folks are at work, but on the table, we have three eggs in the frying pan next to the three-liter glass-walled jar with transparent, lethally powerful, moonshine, in which the lemon peels float not yet below the half-jar. We drink, snack, and listen to the stories of Kuba the Seafarer.

...that time he was late after the vacation, or rather his boat had sailed away sooner than scheduled. So they assigned him to a self-propelled barge for about a month until some other suitable boat would turn up. The crew consisted of him alone, but he strictly kept the maritime regulations on the barge moored at the far wharf by the mouth of the river.

Standing on the bridge he shouted loudly, "Cast off!" And he ran from the bridge to the wharf and removed the lines from the bitts.

Then he jumped back to command "Slow Astern!" and execute it...

"Good fellow, Kuba! Let them know the ours! Down the hatch!"

...and in foreign ports, there are special houses for seamen recreation. Equipped like a luxury hotel, with a restaurant, rooms, a swimming pool. Now, whenever Soviet seamen dive into the pool, the water around their bodies gets spotted with crimson. Abroad, they've become way too advanced and add some chemicals to the water which turns crimson when in contact with urine.

Well, and you know how it goes by us, the first thing after you plunged is to take a leak in the water... So, they have to drain the pool and fill it up again, and the Germans have to sit for another hour over their beer on the tables and wait: "*Rusishe Schweinen*!"

"They themselves are pigs. Half-whacked fascists! Down the hatch-y!"

...in Hong Kong, it was, or maybe Thailand. The ours got moored, visited the city, and were coming back to the pier.

There was a team of dockers, so skinny them all because they live on just rice and seafood. Our boatswain was a hero, two meters tall, he grabbed one of the dockers by his overalls collar and lifted up in the air, like a kitten.

"Yea, bro. Slaving all your life, eh? Bad luck." He put him back and went on.

So that yellow did not understand the brotherly solidarity, and he did not appreciate the Slavonic generous breadth of soul. He runs ahead, jumps up—ya!—and kicks the boatswain into the nose.

Then the ours had a whole hour to water the giant on the pier to bring him back to life.

"And dat's rightee! Here's to Bruce Lee! Down the!"

...Nah! Kuba ain't gonna get married at all. They all are but fucking sluts... A boat in the roadstead ready for sailing off. The captain's wife comes up by a towboat to kiss him goodbye. Happy voyage, dear!. Coming back to the harbor, she's fucking the helmsman and two mechanics, in turn or not quite, in the wheelhouse.

“For freedom! For whores! D’n th’tch!”

...and it's real difficult to smuggle goods from abroad. Any boat zampolit has at least 2 rats among the crew.

"You mean, there are zampolits on boats?!"

"That's the rule."

"I'd better stay a land rat then!"

“T's rightee! For rats! D’nnnnn!”

But I still remembered clearly enough that I was going to the drugstore because my mother asked to fetch her some medication before I went to Nezhyn. Therefore, I most warmly said goodbye to Kuba the Sea Dog, although the lemon peels were not yet scraping the glass of the bottom in the three-liter jar, and in the frying pan there still were glittering, here and there, spots of sunflower oil not fully wiped up with bread.

"No! No! I know! All's gonna be *nyshtyak*."

After the Under-Overpass, I boarded a streetcar to City. I neatly got off it by the Department Store and went round its corner to the drugstore where, by my mother's lead, they sold the needed medicine. Entering the glazed door, I reached the glass partition and, to the question of the woman in white, inhaled a lungful of the air preparing to answer but suddenly realized that even if I could recollect the medication’s name then pronouncing it, or anything else for that matter, was simply unfeasible. Ruefully, I turned around, exhaled and staggered out.

Nonetheless, I somehow managed to cross Peace Square before getting aware that I was done in beyond all bounds and switched over to the guidance of my guardian angel. He steered me into the yard of a five-story apartment block, chose the proper staircase-entrance and took care that I did not spill down the dark stairs to an unfamiliar basement. Then he led me along an endless cemented corridor to the place, where the scattered light from the opening to the outside pit outlined a mesh bed frame, leaned against the wall. It remained only to lower it onto the floor, crash down upon it and conk off. The sheepskin coat and the hat substituted for a sleeping bag.

I woke up in a thoroughly stiff state, but still managed to be in time for the last local train to Nezhyn.

The next weekend, I again volunteered to go to the drugstore after the medicine if my mother reminded me of its name, but she said, no, it was not necessary any longer…

~ ~ ~

There was a New Year dancing party held in the foyer of the New Building. Eera and I were dancing there, and some teacher from the Biology Department could not keep back her delight, she gleefully announced to us that we were created for each other. It's nice to be complimented that way, moreover, by a specialist versed in species. But soon after, the zipper in my jeans blasted, and my sweater was not long enough to hide the hole. So I tried to fasten the sweater hem to the jean's fly with the safety pin lent me by Slavic. However, it did not help to resolve the situation, because the pinched down sweater began to look like a leotard on sub-deb gymnastics girls, besides, I did not care to be pricked into one or another of my private parts if the pin burst too. There remained no other option but go to the Hosty and change my jeans. Normally, I didn't keep spare clothes in my room but changed in Konotop at weekends. Yet, that was a special occasion and I had brought my dapper jeans for dancing at the party. The incident made me change back into shabbier, but sturdier ones.

Upon returning to the foyer, I found Eera in eager conversation with some young buster. I did not like him right away, despite the fact that he was introduced as some of her old acquaintances.

Probably, I couldn't hide my dislike towards him and the feeling became reciprocal. The confrontation did not go over to active hostilities, but the voice timbers acquired menacing pitch. At some point, I looked away from the jackass and caught a glimpse of Eera which deeply amazed me. She blossomed, she was happy! Never before I had ever seen so much joy in her eyes...

On the way to her home, Eera kept picking holes in my reaction to an absolutely normal situation, and I half-heartedly defended myself, busy with storing in my head the new discovery.

> (...the highest bliss and most eagerly craved for moment in a female life arrives when two stag-males are going to clash their horns for her, the prize bitch.
>
> That's it. You vigorously toil like f-f..er..I mean, flustered Pygmalion absorbed so deeply in turning your piece of art into living flesh, panting, drowning in the perspiration of relentless efforts and to what end all that, eh?!.
>
> O, fool! You're slavering for an idle jerk popping up down the road to lap up the goodies of creation that cost you so many pains! No, it's anything but a fair play. Where's the f-f..er..fundamental justice, eh?..)

The New Year Eera met at the Hosty... Before her arrival, I served a romantic table for 2, a bottle of red wine next to an unlit candle and an open can of sprats in oily liquid. There still remained some time and I suddenly decided to prepare a surprise for her, or rather a New Year present...

Since my getting interested in the topic, it was insistently driven in to me that the longer, the better. To wit, the duration of having it indicates the quality of action. The human race invented quite a few tricks for gaining upswing in quality. The simplest one is to kill a glass or 2, I mean

the standard Russian glass of 250 ml. However, stepping on that path you need the right snack. Prosper Merimé, for example, was advocating for soup of cock combs for this particular purpose. I did not have even lard.

The austere circumstances called for finding other means or workarounds. My personal experience in the brute facts of life prompted that of two go-rounds the second having a sex was always longer. Thus, I had no other choice but having a proactive sex.

Very conveniently, Spotty was frisking about the hostel corridor, hither and thither, as if so too busy with her New Year Eve cares. Good timing. I skipped discussing the reasons of my unexpected interest in her or clarifying that I needed nothing but mere technical assistance. Not that such frankness would hurt her in any way. The floozy had seen much more than I could imagine in the wildest dreams before she had to transfer to the Nezhyn State Pedagogical Institute to avoid being sent down from the University of Kiev for grossly unleashed fucking and sucking. Possibly, there were other reasons too, because she casually mentioned that her husband did not wear anything under his jeans at all. Well, I dunno, but for me, an innocent lad from the Settlement, the like extravagances seemed way too deep…

The technical assistance was applied in a neutral, of course, room and in a distanced, orogenital way. With the business-like warning not to crumple her breasts, where there were no erogenous zones, she flung my jeans open, zapped my cock out and went down on it. The pecker met the attacking force with brave unyielding hardon which attitude was retained thru all of the procedure. Regrettably so...

Time went on, she obviously ran out of her store of tricks in giving head but I still couldn't cum. The situation more and more acquired the air of monotony and even considering the ringlets of her hair the color of raven's wing, and the glasses which she never took off, was of no help. And when there started to surface superfluous analogies and uncalled-for reminiscences of a dark alley in the park of Stavropol, I beat a retreat which is not an easy maneuver with a stubborn stalwart at presenting arms in the leg of your jeans.

Still and all, what a smart hell of a subtle plan it was! The second to none willingness for genuine self-sacrifice! A knightly deed, if you find a second to consider it with sufficient introspection... Catering a blow job to Spotty, who had no idea of whereabouts of those f-f…er...frigging erogenous zones of hers. A selflessly chivalrous readiness for anything just to please your beloved! If it was not an irrefutable example of devoted love and tender care, I know of nothing else that could be…

Nevertheless, I did not disclose to Eera what namely I had to get thru just to make her feel good. Because I never was keen on flashing my positive aspects and advertising my noble deeds overmuchly... Later on, that New Year night, when Eera and I sat up at the table again, wrapped in bedsheets like Romans in their togas, Spotty walked by the door opened to the corridor. Out there, with gleeful vehemence, those who met the New Year in the hostel congratulated each other.

Spotty politely knocked on the door jamb, was invited to the table, treated to wine and allowed to ask Eera about her life circumstances. Eera started to drive a fool to her, like, she was a married woman but her husband being a geologist seldom came home. Having just recently moved from Kiev to Nezhyn, Spotty believed anything driven to her which made us laugh immoderately.

The haughty, naive Romans in those loose togas, we were making fun of gullible Spotty without realizing that any jest was the truth which just needed some time to mature…

After the winter examination session, Eera and I went to Borzna for the wedding of her course-mate Vera to her solid groom in the rank of Major. Unlike the wedding of my course-mate two years before in the same Borzna town, the celebration was not a *khutta* affair but took place in the large café-canteen on the main square of that district center, and lasted for two days.

After the first day, Eera and I spent the night in a small *khutta* among the snow-filled vegetable gardens on the outskirts. The *khutta* owner, a distant relative of Vera, was told that Eera and I were a married couple, newlywed, and she, after having her fill at the wedding table, went to sleep over at some other relative's, because her place was a single room with a whitewashed oven, a table, a chair, and a bed. The bed stood by the wide windowsill with the sharply outlined black shadow of the lattice, lightened from outside by the full moon, whose beams set a-gleaming the glass walls in the empty three-liter jar left on the same shadow-crossed sill.

I liked everything there, and the crusty earth floor made of firm, washed-down, clay, and the bed with boards in place of the mesh, and the hay-stuffed mattress... It's highly unlikely that the mistress believed in our being a husband and wife because during the wedding feast I a couple of times caught her gaze, both encouraging and gruffly sneering, from behind the table where she sat among the elderly women in their Sunday best black padded jackets, or in black plush coats with thick plaid kerchiefs spread loosely over their shoulders…

We threw our clothes off on the chair and ascended to the matrimonial bed as it was a century and centuries before in those same *khutta*s lost among those same snowdrifts. The moon reluctantly rose up above the window frame and could no longer follow the merrymaking couple of newlyweds, pressing hay at the alternate ends of the bed rooted in the earth floor of the unchanging *khutta*…

On the second day, Eera grew silly jealous when I was called out from the wedding hall by a local beauty. I did not really get it what's what as in the din of celebration Vera's brother, Mozart by his handle, shouted into my ear the unintelligible message.

Leaving the café-canteen, I went to the half-dark backyard where a beautiful, in general, girl was staging a pathetic hysteria on the trampled snow, pinioned by two girlfriends, all the trinity in light festive dresses. A group of young spectators, who came out to air themselves, crowded by with exhortations to her and pieces of advice to the girls gripping her arms. Without the slightest participation in the amateur show, I turned to leave and met the unforgiving stare of Eera. Back at the table, I had a hard time convincing her that I had nothing to do with the vagaries of the tipsy mantrap. I was supported by Valentina, a female of the most remarkable physique, who sat

next to Eera. Farther on, there was seated an insignificant, on the background of her mighty forms, Armenian.

His Armenian identity was revealed when he was giving the 3 of us a ride thru the early night... On the street leading to the Moscow highway, the big Valentina told him to slow down, and left the Zhiguli to yell at Tolik, her fifth-grader son. The boy was replying to his mother in pure Ukrainian, and I felt somehow knocked out of rut by the winter snow all around so sharply discordant to the boy's Negro face.

Later, Eera told me that Valentina had born Tolik after working at a canteen in Kiev, or maybe she found that job after the delivery, I'm not quite sure on that point because it's where things get always somewhat messy, I mean them those canteens.

Valentina's current life partner of an Armenian was not messing around with the instance of upbringing. We rode along the highway, and after a couple of kilometers stopped on the roadside snow. The driver turned on the tape-recorder and took out a bottle of foil-necked champagne.

> (...the beauty of Armenian music does not open to listeners right away. At that time it was still incomprehensible to me but I kept patient – he, who gives a ride, orders the music...)

A patrol car stopped on the road, and two militiamen in greatcoats and, despite the winter, forage caps approached the Zhiguli. The Armenian stepped out to negotiate and make it clear that everything was safely controlled. In the meantime, Valentina started to resent that I and Eera were staying in a so shabby *khutta*, and undertook to bring her indignation to the bride's parents, who were some kind of her relatives. As a result, the second night we spent in a large, freshly renovated house in the well-to-do part of Borzna.

The moon could not peep into our room there, only a dim reflection of the moonlight made its way to us thru the glazed door of the adjacent veranda. The bed frame was way too creaky, so the mattress had to be thrown on the paint-coated floorboards. Not too bad, in general, but I liked it better in the shabby *khutta*…

We were taken to Nezhyn by the Armenian... Along the way, I was, for some reason, thinking about Tolik, the Negro boy. Catching sight of him, old women in Borzna dropped their jaws and kept crossing themselves behind his back. How does it feel being not like anyone else?

> (...the grandfather of Pushkin was an unalloyed Ethiopian but, at least in his childhood, he saw normal people...)

When we got out his car by the hostel, the Armenian asked me to tarry a second, and after Eera went along, he inquired if I knew the address of the beauty with theatrical traits, he kinda heard she was at some college in Nezhyn. I neither knew nor wanted to know it...

Eera and I went up to a vacant room on the third floor and after half-hour swaying and seesawing the more accustomed bed frame, she said she felt something she never had experienced before.

Well, and thank you! So it was not in vain, exerting myself all that year and a half. Or was it that she just pitied me?.

~ ~ ~

As mentioned already, in February I went to the hospital for more than a week because of my staunch faithfulness to principles. After a week of treatment, my sister Natasha found me there. On the whole of Decemberists Street in Konotop, there was just one phone in the *khutta* at Number 26. I did not know their phone number and even if knowing it I'd hardly call. One and a half weeks were not two years...

I left the wardroom and at the end of the corridor, we went one flight down the stairs leading to the basement. Natasha took out her filter cigarettes, I stuffed a joint into a Belomor-Canal, and we mixed our smokes.

"Well, and how are you?" asked my sister after I reported about Pill going crazy.

"And I also have Eera," said I, and hurriedly began to convince my sister that Eera was not like everyone else, not in the least.

"Well, well," replied Natasha indefinitely…

When I was discharged, I suddenly felt that the struggle for just cause cost me some real straining. On the way to the hostel, I even had to untie the ear-flaps of my rabbit fur hat and let them loose. Never before, even the most severe frost could make me do so, I only rubbed my ears against the turned-up collar of the sheepskin coat, and demanded from the saleswoman at the stand on the station platform to sell me a bottle of frostbitten beer and, despite her exhortations, drank it in small sips thru the ring of ice growing, thickening, narrowing the orifice in the bottle’s neck... And now? You could hardly put your finger on anything more hazardous to your health than hospitals…

In spring at full swing, I was approached by Vitya from the Music-Pedagogical Department. That same student with the ancient Roman's curls of short blonde hair on his head, to whom in the first year of study I was lending my guitar, and who later gave me the key to the vacant room on the fifth floor. Now he came up with a request on behalf of his friend Volodya.

But why didn't Volodya speak up to me directly? After all, we were together in the United Mus-Ped and Anglo-Fac CJR team and took the honorable third place from the available 3.

Well, he, like, was shy. In general, his wife got pregnant and now he had to give blood for the abortion, but he himself was still in the middle of the treatment, tripper, see?

Yeah, clear. Of course, I'd do it for him, no problem. It's they who gave the key to my love affair with Nadya... A glass of blood is such a trifle in spring. And Nadya's worthy of much more than that…

Men's toilet on the third floor of the hostel, besides serving its direct purpose, was also forcing the student body to wake up from their amorphous hibernation. Masses interested in leaflets is not supine any longer. Yet, no ardent KGBist, with all his rats could ever gain promotion on the grounds of headlines cut out from the central press and mounted on glue in the toilet for all to see.

In the Hosty's toilets, like in any, for that matter, other public toilets, cleanly folks never got seated on the seats but got perched instead, sitting on their haunches above the seats too dirty after all the previous squatters. In that bird-like attitude, the visitor inevitably got facing their stall door from within and that's where those cut-outs were placed keeping to no conceivable order, bearing no insidious comments. Just a kinda haphazard collage, sort of. However, left one-to-one with the stall-caged creature, those headings gradually acquired some bizarre connotations and warped innuendos. The hunkers subjected to idle consideration began to see some hidden frivolous meaning, never intended by the editorial staff of the central periodicals where the chance headlines were cut from. Squatting over the bowl shed some new light at quite trite, everyday:

"Care of Party Has to Be Answered

Chain is Strong by its Links

Same 45 Minutes Over Again

Quality is the Priority

By Accelerated Schedule

No Amnesty to Bunglers

In the Name of Peace and Prosperity"

The force of, so to say, circumstances awoke your alertness. And that toilet humor spilled from the stalls reaching the opposite tiled wall with two urinals in it...

As usual, I sped past the first of them proclaiming:

"Waters of North to Flow South"

and pulled up by the second adorned by two headings from different newspapers:

"Biathlon Sport for Courageous

Our Aim is Communism"

I pissed and with the final quake to dry my dick up, there came a strange burning sensation. Looking down, I watched as a strange roiled drop crept lazily out of the urethra slot. I froze; what!?. No! It cannot be!

But no mute pleading could cancel the fact that 3 days before, because of the stupid confluence of circumstances, the moment they switched off the light in the hostel rooms, there was no one in mine, except for a fourth-year student whom I laid on the nearest bed. It happened so quite mechanically; out of pure reflex. She had never turned me on, and—as said already—all that was just some stupid coincidence. With her, I felt no more than the Lucy Mancini's partners from *The Godfather* before she got operated on by Dr. Kennedy's surgeon friend. Like in a church bell…

Itching and burning did not cease; all the polygamy had to be canceled for an unspecified period. Twoic advised me to consult Dr. Grisha who ponderously shook his head, and admitted that several cases of gonorrhea infection had already been recorded in the hostel.

What f-f..er..I mean, flicking gonorrhea?

Yes. The symptoms were very similar, but to know for sure there was needed a laboratory analysis of the semen.

What the f-f..I mean, freak! But I did not know how to do it, I had never masturbated in my life.

Dr. Grisha volunteered to help. We locked ourselves in one of the rooms – he, I and Sveta, well, she was just in case, like, sort of auxiliary contingent.

From his large soft briefcase, Grisha angled a cork-sealed glass tube and handed it to me for collecting the material for analysis. I dropped my jeans and underpants knee-deep and sat on a chair for the procedure at hand. Grisha got seated on the bed opposite, Sveta took place next to him.

He began to drive my foreskin back and forth. The three of us tensely stared at the erect cock with Grisha's hand on it, blurred in rapid flicking up and down... After a couple of minutes of the procedure, Grisha began to often swallow saliva and announced in a strung-up voice that the penis was too dry and in need of applying some moisture.

I did appreciate Sveta's presence, a kinda restraint to his eager willingness to help. And I said that it's okay, never mind, now I knew the way and would try it myself, only I had to take the test tube with me, right?

I zipped my jeans up and, for a goodbye, Grisha gave me a patent medication, some Rifadin in capsules…

Mindful of Maria's promise to cure me in the case of S.T.D., I called her and she told me to come that evening. When I explained to her that I had gonorrhea and needed to extract the semen for

analysis, she opened the bed and started to undress. I had to once again explain that I had gonorrhea, but she said it did not matter.

Then I also began to doff but warned that I'd collect the semen into the test tube. She agreed. Probably, that her contraceptive coil protected not only from pregnancy but from gonorrhea as well. So I put the test tube on the nightstand by the radio, and we started off...

Thais of Athens treated Alexander the Great to some medicine so that they could have sex all night long. I cannot state that all that night with Maria I had an incessant erection. After another and another of her regular "More! A! Mo-re!" we caught a breath before to proceed anew because I couldn't cum until the grayish dawn twilight behind the window curtains got drowned in the broad morning light. (Was that delay effectuated by the presence of the test tube waiting a-gape on the nightstand? I don’t know, I am not an expert.)

At long last, I backed her passionate "More! I want it! A!" with my atonal grunts, and snatched out.

"No! No!" screamed she. "Into me!"

But it was too late, the attained-by-perserverence moment of concluding convulsions the dickhead shared to the rigid glass orifice in the open test tube. With the feel of duty done, I cum into and slammed it shut. Maria obviously did not like such a final, but so was the arrangement…

Perfectly happy with the accomplishment, I hurried to Dr. Grisha and proudly presented the moisture impounded (with so much a-do) within the tight glass walls.

He took off his doctor’s white smock, grabbed his large soft briefcase, and we left his office... On that day, his briefcase could be observed in different and wide apart points in the Nezhyn city, accompanied by the sensual roll of Dr. Grisha's buttocks on one side, and my gait of morose moose on the other. The test tube made the constant fourth to the company, keeping the still unchecked semen out of sight in the hip pocket of my jeans. It seemed that Grisha wanted to help in earnest. Only the day turned out to be such that venereal dispensary did not work, in some laboratory someone left for somewhere else, in another they had run out of something and so on.

About 2 in the afternoon, our harmonious foursome (Grisha, the briefcase, I and the tube) appeared for some reason at the station where we decided that it was enough because the symptoms matched all the same, without any needless checking.

I dropped the test tube into the gray tubular garbage urn located by the large white bust of Lenin nearby the payphone booth in its thick red-and-yellow paint coat, halfway between the station and the high platform for the local trains of Kiev destination.

Dumping the thing was kinda pity, like, we were not complete strangers anymore after going together thru all we had to since our first meeting, however, there was no good reason to keep it on any further…

I went to the Hosty and then returned to the station because the week was over and I needed to show up in Konotop so that my parents would not worry. There were still 10 minutes before the local train to Konotop and, all of a sudden, I was simply pulled to pay a visit to the bust of Lenin.

What I saw there literally dumbfounded me. From the wide circular orifice of the gray urn, a thick bunch of green pliant shoots was vigorously sticking up. I did not immediately get it that while I was away, they trimmed the bushes around the pedestal upholding the bust.

The local train pulled by and, crossing over the platform to the car, I gave the urn one last and proud glance – bushes or no bushes but that f-f..er..I mean, frivolous semen was full of real pep, by Jove! Of course, when abstracting from certain minor details…

Except for imparting a very vivid color to my urine, the Rifadin from Grisha had no other straight or side effects. Thanks to the capsules, I pissed with gleeful scarlet and, overcoming itching and burning, cursed my stupid rakishness with Lucy Mancini.

Maria treacherously washed her hands of me, like, being offended that I preferred some glass tube to her natural vase...

I got cured by Eera. She simply led me to an elderly woman in the barrack-like children hospital. The woman in white took me behind a screen in the corridor to hide from the looks of the queue. I downed my pants a little bit, stooped, got the bite of a shot in my buttock, and... And that's all! Nothing more was required. That’s how the summer came…

~ ~ ~

How did I spend the summer? Like any other decent, diligent, hardworking lad... First of all, I became a plant breeder. Among the beds of turned soil at the end of the garden at 13 Decemberists, there began to rise and boost the crisp growth of cannabis whose seeds provided the last year's loot from the neighbor. The term "bushes" did not seem right for the plants. They looked more like sprouting seedlings of young trees. And those trees were growing like one united family, rushing upwards, turning into a dense thicket, which, of course, called for thinning out by the selection culling.

From the street, that coppice was not visible, screened by the fruit trees, but nothing could evade the attentive neighbors. The neighbor on the right asked my mother about the purpose of the cultivated crop.

My mother replied, that hemp produced a lot of seeds (such small, round, oily looking, beads, you know) and at Bazaar the canary keepers were simply scrambling to get that perfect food for their feathered singers...

Oh, the ingenuity of maternal love! I'd hardly drive a fool of so subtle nature! Most likely, I'd give out some stuff about compresses and foot baths from varicose veins aggravated by salts deposition. And that would be a dangerous mistake because canary keeping was a rare sport in the Settlement when compared to the plenty of labor veterans with deteriorated health. Is it too

hard to imagine an honored vet with a loving teenager relative, who's ready to sacrifice half of his night repose and bring home a remedy to his Grandpa's ailing from a not too faraway plantation?. Okay, let's drop spooking ourselves with nightmares… Anyway, excessive advertising sometimes might damage the growth of business.

And, by the by, the question was asked by the wife of the robbed neighbor who, in addition to his pension, had also the job of a watchman in the nearby Track Machine Station, aka PMS.

> (...and it's not my unseemliness that the organization's name in Russian, when abbreviated, coincides with that of Premenstrual Syndrome...)

I did not have much scruples about expropriating his cannabis because after the raid there was left enough to keep him up till the following season.

> (...it's only now, in retrospect, I think of a possibility that he might have had his clients with canaries...)

By that time, it was several years since my mother left the KEMZ Plant and got a job in the RepBase pre-assembly unit. I gather it, they were checking the availability of helicopter spare parts there. Physically, her job was not exhausting and returning home after a day's work, she often shared news about what was going on in the collective comprising only females, except for the unit chief and his deputy.

At her workplace, her main function was that of a conflict-extinguisher, sort of, while at the periods of lull she played compliments. That is, after telling someone another of her pleasantries she scored herself a point.

> (...it calls for a good self-schooling and close self-control not to get stuck in the repetition of what had been already used to please...)

Sometimes the chief of their unit would shake his head and say, "That's a cunning she-Jew for you! Found again how to lick!"

And my mother would joyously laugh in response, and she laughed at home retelling the compliment which brought her one more point…

My brother Sasha worked at the PMS in a team of repairers. They were in charge of replacing the ties in the railway tracks and ramming the gravel under them with a massive dildo-type hand-vibrator.

Our sister Natasha, while out of work, was taking my daughter Lenochka to the kindergarten and back...

To the request of my father, the personnel department at the RepBase let me have a temporary job, till end summer, at the construction shop floor there. With three permanent workmen, I was demolishing and building some walls within the RepBase grounds. The most straining part in the

job was long waits before they brought mortar for us to start our work. There I earned a fig plus another fig and one more fig, but then the work was just to get seated and sit tight, or stand up and stand patiently. Anyway, the RepBase was fully satisfied with my masonry skills.

Having nothing better to do, I again grew a beard and the RepBase workforce handled me "Fidel Castro". My father liked it, maybe because he and Fidel were born in the same year. When run out of the smoke, I went to beg from my father. He was a locksmith at the shop floor with strict regulations about smoking, which only was allowed in specially designated places, like an open gazebo in the yard...

My father was respected on the shop floor for his golden hands and readiness to share the know-how... When coming across a bungler wasting both himself and the stuff to turn out a pitiful throwaway, you can quietly scoff to yourself and go away minding your business. Not so was my father's ways, because of his intolerance to illiteracy.

With a painful wince in his face, he would stand by, as if made to watch some vulgar act of dicking around, then he'd come up, take the instrument from the dilettante's hands and show how to go about that particular task, "See? It's just a lead-pipe cinch, easier than boiling turnips!" That's why he was respected, and they did not take offense at his grumpy mutter, "Really have to do it askew? So they taught you, eh?"

The majority of the RepBase workers came there from the nearby village of Popovka, and too few of then trained in the "seminary". Popovka had integrated with the RepBase so closely that in the village you could come across fencing made of helicopter blades, discarded, of course. But the blade cinched up to the stake with a piece of wire looks ugly, and fixing it by a neat binding as suggested uncle Kolya was completely another kettle of fish…

In the unpaneled half-*khutta* at Decemberists 13, resided auntie Zeena, a lonely pensioner. She plaited her half-gray hair into stringy maiden braids and tied them together at the back of her head. On the porch at her door, for the most of the year, there also hung a yellow braid of dried onions forming a plaited circle. Auntie Zina did not interfere with the life of the yard and smiled at everyone. Each spring, following the directive of our father, my brother and I turned the dirt in her part of the garden... Once, she was very friendly with Olga, and secretly resented my role in our divorce, but she still kept smiling even at me...

There was enough living space in our brick-paneled half-*khutta* of three rooms and a kitchen plus veranda, apart from the summer room in the yard under one roof with the shed. Among the inhabitants of all that area, only five-year-old Lenochka was not smoking. The rest of us smoked Belomor-Canal for 22 kopecks, except for Natasha with her filtered Metropolitan for 40 kopecks. She once counted up that the total expenditure for cigarettes by the family was 25 to 30 rubles monthly…

The summer was over and before my first departure for the fourth course at the English Department, my mother asked if I would bring and introduce to her my Eera from Nezhyn. She knew about Eera from Natasha's report and subsequent questioning of me. And she had even seen Eera on the all-out photograph taken at the Borzna wedding. The picture was staged in the

photo studio of the district center, where the guests and relatives of the newlyweds were standing in three rows on the long benches of descending height, behind the happy bride and groom in their chairs.

My mother asked me to show who from the multitude was Eera, and I answered, "Find for yourself." In the picture, I stood in the upper row on the right, surrounded by 3 girls, and Eera was in the diagonally opposite corner.

My mother's finger touched her face, "That's her?"

I felt that she, for some reason, would rather be mistaken, but I couldn't lie to my mother. "How d'you guess?"

"I don't know."

> (...the first prosaic work in Ukrainian was *The Witch of Konotop* written by Kvitka-Osnovyanenko in 1833.
>
> Ask whoever you choose, "Why?" and they will answer, "I don't know."...)

Therefore, in September following the serene summer of 1977, the meeting of your mother and grandmother took place at 13, Decemberists Street...

Of course, I had been bringing Eera to Konotop even before that and introduced her to the high life of the polite circle in local society. We visited Loony, where the demonstration gladiatorial performance was staged on the parquet in honor of her visit, I even had, just in case, to block her off with myself nearby the stage. Then Lyalka led us to his sidekick's who, in his treasure box made of a human skull, kept the high-quality Gimp’s weed, named so after its meritorious producer.

The sidekick lived on the fourth floor with his cat, whom he grabbed regularly to hurl against the wall or anything at all. Not everyone brings up their pets by unsystematic fondling. He shared that sometimes at night he got waked up by a gentle touch of her fangs at his Adam's apple. She did not spoil the throat skin though, just held it in a kinda soft reminder who was the midnight commander in the place they shared...

When we were about to leave, Eera discovered the loss of her gloves. The sidekick swore he had not seen any. Burning with shame, I began to speculate about the gloves being forgotten at Loony, yet Lyalka insisted on the search to go on until they were eventually spotted, behind the floor mirror in the hallway. Some cats are more cunning at theft than even such attested pilferers as magpies...

In the staircase, there was, naturally, no light, and I walked first, groping for the steps with my feet, and did not even hold onto the railing, like the brave tin soldier or the one-eyed leader in the gang of the blind from the "Eulenspiegel" movie, because in the pitch dark I had Eera's hand on my shoulder, and Lyalka was holding on hers. So we descended...

At that Eera's visit, we spent the night at Skully's, who had already become an Adoptee and lived in a fairly big *khutta* where two "Jawa" bikes stood in the garage – one for him and the other for his wife's younger brother.

Eera and I were left in a separate bedroom and, going out, Skully and his wife significantly hung a terry towel on the back of the bed... When we lay down and from the "Spidola" receiver there sounded the introduction to my favorite "Since I'm loving you" by Led Zeppelin, I realized that nothing better could be provided even by Las Vegas…

On another occasion, we even visited Decemberists 13, in the daytime, naturally, when there was no one there. After champagne and a joint, we got in a deeply playful mood so that auntie Zina in her part of the *khutta* panicked, ran to our front door, and kicked up alarmed drumming at it. Probably, the echoes of our frolics passed thru the partition wall making her think of bloody murder in the canonical traditions of the post-war bandit period in the history of the city because it's highly unlikely that the old innocent lady had any notion of hardcore scenes and stuff…

So, Eera met my brother and sister at the Loony dances, and she knew Lenochka unilaterally from the pictures shot at the photo session around Rabentus' dovecot, which I later pasted on the wallpaper over my bed in the Hosty…

Apart from Eera coming to Konotop to meet my parents, Slavic also was taken along. He and my sister measured each other with guarded looks but skipped sniffing. And that was correct because I brought Slavic for another purpose – I needed him to be put on the alert.

> (..."the most powerful force is the force of habit" or something like that was said by V. I. Lenin in one of his works from the 58-volume collection, and, quoting the colonel of counter-revolutionary Whites from the movie "Chapaev":
>
> "Yes, it's where the Bolshevik leader is right."...)

Consider me, for instance. I have an ample plantation of cannabis to keep me lavishly up to the following season, even with generous largesses to those two tail-clinging bros – Slavic and Twoic. On the other hand, I am in the habit of plundering other folks' plantations. Who'll bite the dust – sound reason or deep-rooted habit? Make your bets, gentlemen!

> (...it's sometimes hard to refute the truth in Leninist theses...)

And what else, apart from the habit, smashes up all of the chop-logic reasoning? What drives us on and further on? What pushes to the new, the unknown?

> Hope – what if the luck would have it?.
>
> Faith – but there should be, there is somewhere!.
>
> And Love, of course, the love to knowledge and change...

All that summer whenever riding a streetcar along May Day Street, I watchfully kept track of the cannabis growth stages in the Buttuke's *khutta* yard, and I dreamed of, wished and hoped for it's being of some nonpareil quality, as heavy-duty stuff as was the kif shared by Rabentus for the deeper comprehension of that unforgettable lecture by Scnar.

Once upon a time, Buttuke was the legend and role model for the youth not only in the Settlement but all over the city. Everyone knew Buttuke who did not care a damn for the traffic-officers from State Auto Inspection, aka GAI, and all the militia in the bargain. They just couldn't catch up with him to fine for riding his bike without a helmet, wearing only his long windblown hair.

What? Drunken driving? You have to catch up and prove it, first!. Two patrols ambushed him at night in Zelenchuk Area but he made his "Jawa" leap between the poplars and shoot away along a gleaming railhead in the streetcar tracks. The word "biker" plodded to Konotop much later – we had Buttuke...

And suddenly thundered the news that shook the guys like the Tower of Babel – Buttuke died!

"Bullshit! Alive, but in the reanimation ward."

And the speed was a mere 60 kph, well, plus that of the counter-moving bus whose radiator Buttuke rammed with his head that chanced to have a helmet at the moment.

"See, dudes? The helmet is a good idea, so they do not need to scratch your brains off the asphalt, the shit stays in the helmet neat and tidy."

Buttuke survived, only his mug remained patch-checkered after the restoration. They took the motorcycle from him together with the license, and never gave back. To demonstrate his indignant protest, he became bald and got some loader job. In short, Buttuke was no legend anymore.

However, he bought a scooter and made an eye candy of it – the windshield, rear-view mirrors, as well as all kinds of pendants dangling all around. The saddle was covered with fleece, long and white. And (what was characteristic) he never rode his scooter without a helmet on his head. A regular biker helmet, and also white to match the fleece under his ass...

And now let's reflect on a natural situation – I go to bomb his grass and he suddenly pops out: how could I possibly guess what was still lingering under that white helmet of his? So I brought Slavic too since there was enough of living space...

When it got dark the 2 of us went out.

"Once we went to do our job, me and Rabinovich..."

The moment we were leaving, Eera got very nervous and asked to lock her up in the summer room.

"What's the problem? Lock the door from inside."

"No! You do it."

Well, I locked the door from outside and gave the key back thru the window because I did not know when we were going to return.

(...there's still a lot of things that I will never understand...)

When we returned, Eera checked the loot.

No! She did not even smoke cigarettes but could determine weed quality by simply sniffing at it. With the accuracy of up to 80 percent... In general, the spoils from Buttuke were from the remaining 20 percent, I wouldn't grow such crap on my plantation…

Later in Nezhyn, Slavic sniffed out one more cannabis growing spot next to the bridge across the Oster, near the Bazaar square. He brought me to the location and showed the lush beauties as if decorated with ostrich feathers of green. However, the property was surrounded by a tall fence.

I also do not like monotony, yet once again we went out in the dark because a habit is the most irresistible force... So, I climbed over the fence and with the ghostly gait of a sneaking redskin approached the one-summer-old trees. The *khutta* stood aside and was not in the way with the light in only one window. Well, let the man watch his TV program, I don't mind.

No sooner I gently rustled the magnificent beauties than the ground started to quake in a pulsating seismic tremor accompanied by a thunder-like clatter from the *khutta* direction, and the light from the window was eclipsed by the black silhouette of that galloping Dog of Baskervilles.

It took a split-sec for all that happened then and, actually, without my participation. The instinct, laid in our spinal cord by countless generations of gnawed to death and shredded ancestors, did the trick. I could only watch how the fence jumped to meet me, and my right pedal extremity kicked its top rail.

Somewhere unbelievably far below, by the narrow vein of the Oster river, shimmering in the dark of the Ukrainian night, the already indistinguishable fence shook and vibrated from the ramming push of the wolfhound... I left the upper layers of the stratosphere but, halfway to the moon, it occurred to me that there was not enough air in my lungs for the return to my native planet. That's how I forsook becoming "Apollo 14"...

Slavic was saved only by his desperate spurt from the spot of my landing. Because among the ancestors, that mutually formed our spinal cord, lots of wretches got squashed flat too…

~ ~ ~

The fourth course was not sent to a collective farm with patronage assistance, we had a month of school practice but this time in village schools. Another difference to the school practice at the third course—finalized with the written comment from the respective city school teacher bubbling of what incredibly wonderful teachers we, the students she had been in charge of, were going to become in future—was that each group of trainees had an overseer from the English Department to assess our professional skills by the practice results. An eye for an eye, so to speak, because we also evaluated them in the years of our study…

When we, the first-year students, were split into 4 study groups, Lydia Panova became the curator of mine. She was a spinster and in unrequited love with Deputy Dean of the English Department, Alexander Bliznuke, who, in his turn, was in unrequited love with his young beautiful wife. Taking advantage of his official position, Bliznuke employed his wife as a teacher at the English Department as soon as she graduated the Nezhyn institute, but the ungrateful one soon jilted him and fled to someone else in Kiev.

Lydia Panova, with her hormonal mustache, thick glasses and the equally thick mask of makeup on her face, had no chances to lasso Bliznuke, although the girls of my group were pulling for her. She lived in the five-story block for the institute teachers by the sports grounds in the Count's Park and whenever Bliznuke had an imprudence of walking under her balcony, she started talking to him in English, and the following day she was teaching us more enthusiastically.

The second group's curator was Nona Panchenko (not a relative to the famous boxer), she also was unmarried and wore glasses, but no cosmetic plaster, and looked much younger than Panova. Once at some kind of voluntary Saturday work, Veerich wanted to treat her to a glass of wine. I played the errand-boy and approached her with it, like, would you have a sip of lemonade to quench the labor thirst? She smiled at me with a pleasant smile and refused. Nona smiled pleasantly at everyone but wasn't lassoing anybody.

The curator of the third group wore glasses (again!) was a blonde and a perfect fool (yes, monotony). She mastered English within the limits of the textbook by Galperin for the first-year students and unconsciously loved Sasha Bryounchooguin, the only boy in the group under her curatorship. To that conclusion, I was led by her habit to take the floor at every general meeting of the English Department with a harangue in his address, like that Roman senator with his constant call to destroy Carthage.

A local boy from a well-to-do family, polite and ever-smiling, he 2 times a month attended classes. Who would ask for more? But she had been crushing on him non-stop for 4 years. She literally f-f..er..I mean, filled everyone’s ears with her crying in the wilderness.

As we, already as the fourth-year students, were at a meeting in the big Auditorium 4, she again took the floor to chew the same rag, "Admire, please! Bryounchooguin's skipping even the general meeting!"

And then even the wind outside couldn't stand it anymore and slammed the tall windows, open on the occasion of spring and good weather. The panes got nearly smashed out.

She ducked and lost what there was further to proclaim in her perennial hit clue about Carthage…

And at last, the curator without glasses, the curator of non-feminine gender, the curator of the fourth group was Roma Gourevitch. He was also a Jew, as any of all other Gourevitches I've ever met, or as that same Bliznuke, only older and balder. And he was constantly busy with debating or talking to some or another one, completely involved and steaming with enthusiasm…

Once I had to retake a test on the subject he taught. The affair was to be settled in the Old Building, of course. Making sure that he got out of the New Building in the right direction, I went to the Old Building and waited for his approach. 10 minutes later I grew worried and combed thru the 200 meters of the asphalt path between the Old and the New Buildings. He had just reached the corner of the New Building, stopping every counter moving teacher for an animated discussion. I returned to the position by the Old Building but this time got seated on a bench under the giant Birches. 20 minutes later, he could be spotted by the big sad bust of Gogol. Good fellow, Roma! The half of the distance over!. Yet, do you have much of a choice when the teacher is late for the appointed retaking of the test you failed at the first go?

It took Roma 62 minutes to get over that f-f..er..I mean, flimsy 200 meters, but I'm sure that was not the limit of his knack for loitering. For all that, I bestowed him with the handle "ebullient slacker". His official appellation contrôlée was "Roma-Phonetist" though because he was distinguished against the rest of teachers at the English Department by the purest pronunciation of the sound "th". It was he who read the texts about the Parkers family on the tape-recorder for the students to parrot them in the booths of the Language Laboratory. No wonder he was referred to as "Phonetist"…

Besides the Phonetics, we were taught lots of other subjects, different and necessary. Take, for example, the Comparative Lexicosemantosurdographosemasiology – your tongue would go to pieces before you manage to pass the exam. That Comparative Lexi...well, whatever...ology was studied under a hereditary teacher. The dynasty broke off at her because she was a retired virgin and chastely buttoned her teacher's raincoat with a huge safety pin up to the fold in the dried-up skin under her chin.

She was an irreplaceable pensioner because it was her, who wrote the textbook on the subject. A skinny paperback pamphlet from the institute printing house with the smeared typeface authored by...well, it's embarrassing...the name was such...with some whistling sound in it...or maybe hissing?. Anyway, her name was shorter than that of the subject... Yes, I remembered! Shakhrai she was! (And it's not a handle, faith! Some Ukrainian last names do make you think before you jump.)

If during her lectures she allowed herself too much, sort of, walking along the aisle between long desk rows, say, how do they stick down my comparatively smeared pearls into their notebooks? – there was nothing easier than putting her in her proper place. Undo your shirt on the chest, 2 or 3 buttons, and stroke wistfully and gently your hair on the solar plexus. That's all. The hissing wanderings got safely blocked and till the break bell, she would be sitting at the teacher desk like a nice little girl, staring at her plan of the lecture which she knew by heart... I do adore virgins.

Zhomnir once said that after even the briefest talk with her, he got an itching desire to take a bath. Well, tastes differ. I do not remember if I took a shower after the exam on that most Comparative – well, how-you'd-call-it – at which I also had to scratch my chest...

And all those were our specialization subjects, apart from general ones lectured by teachers from other faculties and departments. And each lecturer fancied themselves a Don Corleone extorting due respect, like, he or she made me an offer I couldn't refuse and returning to the student hostel I would immediately plunge into the study of their subject... Yeah, as soon as I'm back to the Hosty!

The only one who evoked sympathy in me was Samorodnitsky, for some of the philosophies because he lit a cigarette at his exam. Openly so, imposingly, and, with all that, in a good manner – he took from his briefcase an ashtray with a lid and shook the cigarette ash off into it.

To that examination, I came from the Hosty and started driving some kind of a fool improvising from a lamppost, possibly from some different philosophy. But he suddenly got interested, sat upright, and put me 4. He said that I needed to change the Department, and he would see to it, but soon after he emigrated to Israel…

So, I was practicing at the school of the sugar factory at the station of Nosovka (20 minutes by a local train from Nezhyn in the Kiev direction) and Zhomnir was in charge of our group of trainees.

Early in the morning, we went there from the high platform of the Nezhyn station – the team of 10 students from different groups and Zhomnir in his teacher's raincoat and dark blue beret, gripping his briefcase with cave-in sides.

> (...everyone dresses to fit their role model.
>
> Beret, raincoat, briefcase – read "teacher". Can you imagine a plumber in such an outfit?. That's what I mean...)

Before the practice, my mother sewed me a jacket. It looked like a geologist anti-encephalitis jacket but from a thicker tarpaulin of green color. I liked it, especially the color of so a Robin-Hoodish hue...

The most vivid impression from the practice was left by the football match between the sugar factory team and that from the locomotive depot of the Fastov station. The game in the championship for the Cup of the Trade-Union Committee of the South-Western Railway took place on the school football field. I went out of the school building for a break between the classes and got stuck.

It was a warm and sunny September day. On the green grass of the field, some 20 men were chasing a single ball, and a separate mujik ran in their wake and whistled with shrill trills. The crowds of fans were represented by, firstly, a grim man in black overalls and, secondly, me. I start the count with him because he was the first to stand by the field edge, and he was a more

intent watcher – it took me a while to go under the trees behind one of the goals for to stuff a joint. On coming back, I left a respectful distance between me and the other fan not to tease his sense of smell with vain hopes or odd reminiscences. I just stood in the sun and enjoyed the championship match.

A sharp sting in the neck threw me from high. I recoiled, slapped the wasp, looked back and saw Igor Recoon sneaking up from behind with a guileful grin.

I hid neither the joint nor the smoke, "Igor, when you have any questions come up openly and speak easy."

He effaced the smile and said, no, he was just so, and then hurried to the school where sounded the long bell for classes.

A young errand-boy arrived on his bicycle with a bag-load of doping for the local bozos in the field. They jogged, and gulped, and passed the bottles to each other to furiously rush to attack.

The right halfback of the visiting team passed the ball to the central forward, who went to the corner of the penalty and with a slight but accurate blow rolled the ball into the bottom left corner of the goal. "Goal!" shouted the striker together with the rest of his team.

"No!" roared the local slobs.

Jogging back to his half of the field, the striker came across a wall of 3 locals. "No goal!" they howled at him.

"As if I argue," answered he bypassing their line, unable though to suppress his contented smile.

There was no way to prove anything because the goal had not any mesh and the referee at the goal moment was looking up in the sky together with the bottom of the bottle handed to him by a local footballer.

I approached the first half of the match-watchers, and put a direct question, "So, was it a goal or what?"

The mujik in overalls surly nodded. I rejoiced that the truth, even though mutely, was still present in this world, at least among the working class.

The match for the Cup of Trade-Union of the South-Western Railway ended in a draw, 0:0…

Zhomnir warned that as Head of the Practice, he couldn't put me more than "three" for the chronic absence of lesson plans written by me though they were the must. And I couldn't force myself to at least copy those f-f..er..I mean, fanciful plans from Igor because I was physically unable lining dolls in a row on the piano lid.

I asked Zhomnir not to worry and put whatever mark he could. I really did not give a f-f..er.. I found it meaningless, I mean... When on the third floor of the Old Building the fourth-year students' practice results were fixed next to the Time-Table, I was the one and only having "three". Zhomnir alarmed and started to convince Deaness of the English Department that it was wrong, and he could not have imagined I was so unique. She impregnably advised to look before jumping.

The current Deaness always tried to have the looks of Alice Freindlich from "The Office Affair" movie, only that no Myagkov turned up for her, and she stayed a flinty bureaucrat. Yet, in her cupboard, she kept the skeleton of her divorce on the grounds of sexual incompatibility, because the girls from the English Department did not leak unverified information.

Okay, enough is enough, that'll do for the strangers of all kinds...and now enters...you!.

~ ~ ~

Your personal conception took place on the fourth floor in the Hosty. That particular date Eera arranged herself since it was a room of Phys-Math girls and among the students of the Physics and Math Department I knew only that pair of cooks from the student construction platoon, but they lived in the city.

Shortly before the event, I once again fell in love with Eera but, at first, I did put the end to my polygamy. And could it be otherwise? To Eera alone I owed that salvage shot from gonorrhea.

So, on arrival in Nezhyn for the final academic year, I became straight and reasonable. And I dryly informed Sveta of my reformation when she attempted at the former familiarity. We became just a nodding acquaintance and vague recollection to each other.

And I also returned Maria the book borrowed from her several months ago. Though, I chose a late hour for nullifying that bifurcation.

She opened her door to the staircase landing, in the unbuttoned robe over her nightie. If we assume the possibility of time shifts, then at that moment it easily could be I in her bed awaiting when she'd sent away that dork outside... I did not develop this theory but simply handed the book in, thanked, and left…

And since then my love belonged only to Eera, absolutely undivided, especially after the mentioned falling in love with her once again. It happened when at a chance meeting on the third floor of the Old Building in the wing occupied by the Philological Department, I persuaded Eera to skip a class and, after the bell shut up, we sneaked along the wide empty corridor to the side staircase. There, we did not go down the stairs but followed the ascending flights, although the building had no fourth floor, and the last flight was blocked by a partition with the locked door to the attic. We stopped in the middle of that flight and kissed.

> (...her classic breasts under the river algae shade of green in the knitted sweater to match her mermaid-style hairdo, the silk skirt on the strong hips swelling the sketchy

outlines of white abstract bunches on the black background, tailored by Maria Antonovna, Lyalka's mother, high wedge Austrian high boots, her eyes slant all too slightly, the slender white Lorraine cross of the frame in the arched tall window behind her back, with the Renaissance azure blue of the sky in its panes, the foamy white splash of dove's wings on the other side of that cross – all that and everything else merged into the picture that I will see and remember all my life...)

But having memories alone was not enough for me, I wanted to keep all that or to stay myself within that desperately inexpressible beauty. The kisses were to no avail, they couldn't stop the fleeting moment. So all that only remained there, all I could do was falling in love...

In the evening, already on the stairs in the Hosty, Eera passed me the key to the room of the Phys-Math students, so that I went first to open it and she would follow a minute later to keep the rules of secrecy... We did not turn on the light. The bed stood by the window overlooking the Oster banks invisible in the darkness.

With Eera, the burden of protection lay on me, that is, getting out in time to avoid abortion was my responsibility. But on that particular night...a tad bit more!..I'm in control!..more!..just a sec...y-u!..out of the blue!..too late...the train's left...

You were on that train, in the crowd of all-alike fellow-travelers, only you turned out to be a little bit nimbler…

Well, and then – a smooth transition to the already checked out technology: as a quality man of noble disposition, I had to marry. More so, that I would not survive another Eera's report on abortion under general anesthesia…

When Eera was still a schoolgirl, she found a ring on the bridge over the Oster; a nick-knackery ring of those that they sell at stalls among the other casual pieces of fake jewelry. Eera brought it home and her mother, Gaina Mikhailovna, got sad and distressed but she said nothing to her daughter…

Was Eera's marriage with the divorced me a misalliance? Undoubtedly and undeniably. Even a brief matching of the would-be newlyweds' parental pairs against each other would prove it to the hilt:

Spare-Parts Checker at the RepBase vs.

Teacher of German Language at the Nezhyn State Pedagogical Institute of Order of the Labor Red Banner named after Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol;

Locksmith at the RepBase vs.

Deputy Director of the Nezhyn Bakery Plant.

However, the factor of your presence, even though not born yet, mitigated the caste prejudices which, by the way, had long since been abolished by the Soviet system. Still and all, even in the era of the developed socialism in our country, throughout our pre-wedding trip to Kiev, I had my anus impaled on the stake, a kinda admonishment for the cheeky pariah.

Kiev was needed to exchange the coupons from Nezhyn ZAGS for goods in the metropolitan bridal salons. True, the divorce-stamp in my passport nullified any discounts for a wedding ring for me, yet my sister Natasha promised to lend me the neat gold ring that she wore, for some odd reason, on her thumb. As for the stake, it was not seen from outside, but caused horrible pangs within the rectum and turned my gait into drag-and-shuffles of a semi-palsied old man or that of a young Cossack raider who was removed from the said impalement-stake after a slightly belated amnesty. "Mercy, Cossack-brothers! Finish me off!"

Poor Eera! Would any girl in her dearest girlish dreams ever dream of such a companion to a bridal salon?. Never! By no means! No and no, over again!

To me, the hellish torture suffered on that trip served the palpable reminder of the truth from Heraclitus: never enter the same river, for your ass' safety sake!.

Alas! The wisdom of the previous generations does not make us wiser until we (quoting the famous letter of Ukrainian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey) get seated on a hedgehog with the personal stark naked arse.

Nevertheless, in Kiev, the bride got rigged for the impending happy occasion, and I bought brown shoes made by the Dutch company "Topman". The footwear was a bit too loose, but the realities of the era of deficits taught us grabbing any chance bird at hand, and a month later the shoes become a fitting hand-me-downs to my father-in-law. That's for whose sake I was dragging that stake!.

Soon, I felt better and we started looking for a suit to dress the groom. We combed thru the department stores of major railway stations between Nezhyn and Kiev: Nosovka, Kobyzhchi, Bobrovitsa – to no avail. The suit was hunted down only in Chernigov, far from the electrified railroads, and it imparted quite a decent look to me.

A week before the wedding, I left the hostel and moved to the three-room apartment of Eera's parents… The eldest of their 4 children, Igor, was a Major of some sophisticated troops stationed in the city of Kiev. Victoria, their next child, lived in Chernigov and worked in the city museum there.

Then came Tonya, who graduated the NGPI and was sent to teach Russian language and literature to kiddies in a Transcarpathian village, where she met a local boy, Ivan, whose courting (in a simple and unpretentious style of a Bandera man) kindled reciprocative feelings in her... Unable to reach over the language barrier, he knocked on the door of the young teacher late in the evening and, when it opened, his shotgun was mutely pointed at her chest. Like, be mine or nobody else’s.

Ivan's brothers were in time to disarm him, but the depth of feelings in the romantic lover did impress Tonya, which her attitude deserved her a chance to survive among the superb views of the Transcarpathian nature. She married him, gave birth to a pair of lovely children, returned to Nezhyn and, together with her entire young family, lived in one of the narrow bedrooms in the three-room apartment of her parents.

For their night rest, the parents enjoyed the folding coach-bed by the wall in the living room which also served a passage to both bedrooms. Opposite to that blind wall, there was a wide window behind a tulle curtain separating the windowsill occupied by a couple of neglected aloe flowerpots from the abutting table with the TV box on its top.

The curtain also veiled the backs of the chairs squeezed in between the table and the windowsill so that the chairs pushed under the tabletop would not take up space until needed. The chairs had plush-covered seats and they were from the same set with the table which, if you removed off it the electric iron, the messy pile of central newspapers, the TV, and the checkered oilcloth, presented its dark glossy varnish and could be folded out for a celebration feast.

When there was no festivity, those chairs from the set that found no place under the folded-back table were put in the corners of the living room, draped with the clothes for household wear and keeping heaps of those same newspapers, and all sorts of whatnots dumped upon their seats to keep them out of the way for a minute or two and forgotten there for a couple of months.

Besides all that, the living room also contained a wardrobe with a big mirror in its door, and a varnished hutch whose front was of two sliding glass-sheets protecting from the dust two shelves of crockery inside. Upon the hutch, there stood, lamely leaning its frame against the faded wallpaper, a repro of "The Unknown Beauty" by Kramskoy and scornfully observed from under her ostrich feather the dump around, including the "The Major's Matchmaking" repro fixed in the opposite wall.

There was no balcony in the apartment, thanks to its being situated on the first floor, but there was a boxroom niche in the tiny passage between the living room and the bedroom filled up with Tonya's family.

Eera and I were placed in the second, narrower, bedroom with a large plywood chiffonier from the times of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, and a veteran pier glass on a small table between the door and the windowsill. Along the wall with the carpet of almost the same pattern as in my parents', there stood the hand-me-down conjugal double bed for the soon-to-be newlyweds. It remained only to get married…

~ ~ ~

In the late evening before the bridal, Gaina Mikhailovna offered her services for ironing the trousers of my wedding suit, which task, in her opinion, she could do virtuously because in the years of the German occupation she, a young girl Gaina, was taken from a hinterland Ukrainian village and moved to Germany to work for more than two years as a "guest-worker" in a well-to-

do German family by whom she became a past master in the above-mentioned art... Strange are the shuffle-and-deal ways of the knowledge deck, but it was how I learned that

Pants Are To Be Ironed On All Four Sides.

I clearly understood the rule and firmly kept to it all my life, but at that particular moment the unconquered spirit of a young pioneer partisan awoke in me, and I rejected the offer of my the-next-day-to-be mother-in-law. Like, it was not the first time for me to iron trousers thru a piece of moistened gauze... With the ironing accomplished, I hung the trousers over the back of a chair pushed under the table and went to bed.

In the morning I was awakened by Eera's sobs in the adjacent living room. Going out there, I traced back the grim silent glare of Gaina Mikhailovna to see an undeniably hot iron print on one of the trouser-legs hanging accurately from the back of the chair. Poor Eera!

The burnt spot, albeit blurred and lacking the clear-cut outline, discernibly changed the smoky shade of dark gray in the trousers' fabric to something greenish. I could swear that nothing of the kind was there the night before, but the spot sat on one of the two sides I had applied the iron to. It cost me helluva efforts to persuade Eera not to cancel going to the ZAGS office – we had pulled thru too much of everything to make a U-turn at the last moment. I swore with the most solemn oath to hide the damaged part of my outfit into the folds of her long wedding dress.

Do brides have always to cry on the threshold to their wedding? Poor Eera!

Then there was a very long wait at the registry office, because the witness on the groom side, Slavic, that bitch of my best man, appeared only after my brother Sasha scribbled Slavic's name instead of him. Good news that they did not check witness' passports in ZAGS.

Yes, my brother and sister came from Konotop for the wedding and departed on the same day by the 17.15 local train.

So, at last, in all its glory arrived the dazzle of the breath-taking moment in the nuptials – the happy couple were suggested to exchange the wedding rings in a token of spousal love and loyalty. Softly glided the ring on the Eera's incomparable finger – the yellow of the gold over the alabaster white skin... And now, already not as a bride, but the accomplished wife, picked she my wedding ring from the white saucer to don it on my finger. On slid the ring, in moved my finger...my finger moved in...my f-f...finger moved...

Why that bitch of the ring from Natasha got stuck on my finger joint, I have no idea because at the preliminary tests it, like, was getting over. Under my breath, I promised my young wife that, okay, I'll stick it in later, and balled my hand into a fist to hide the under-donned ring.

"The wedding ring is not a frill... Oh, no!.

Not an empty decoration..."

Poor Eera!.

But what else could she do? The incipient maternal instinct balked at having to bear you without a daddy… The recollections of my meetings with the KGBist in that very ZAGS room as well as the awareness of the iron print on my pants' leg made me keep my eyes shyly down, however, my brother Sasha on the pictures taken at the registry office looked very well, like a young Sicilian mafioso...

According to the long-established Nezhyn tradition, the newlyweds together with their witnesses (Slavic had already replaced Sasha) took a ride in a taxi. The taxi drove to the station to honk in the square in front of it (the traffic bridge over the railway tracks had been already completed) and proceeded to the city limit by the highway to Pryluky, where a bottle of champagne was burst open, after which we returned to 26, Red Partisans Street, Apartment 11.

The wedding party was a modest one – for the closest family inhabiting the apartment, plus the two best persons. The TV was temporarily exiled into the corner, the table spread out and cluttered with feasting treats and snacks, mostly of salad Olivier which Gaina Mikhailovna had chopped so finely and profusely, filling, in the preparation, half of an enamel washing basin.

And the drinks were fabulous too. Like those from the traditional refrain in the final lines of every other Russian fairy tale, "And I was at that wedding and drank the mead and beer…" subtracting "the mead", of course. Gaina Mikhailovna, like any other properly erudite woman, had since long gained the upper hand over her husband, bent him to her will and twisted around her little finger, using for the purpose the panicky males' fear of a possible cuckoldry.

> (...fall in with what your dear wife tells you, and be happy with two glasses of beer on a celebration day if you wanna miss yet that proud decoration of stags...)

Hence that beer and only beer on the wedding table... Tonya and Ivan took turns looking after their baby daughter in the bedroom, while their three-year-old son Igor was irremovably present at the table.

Then the baby was also brought to the living room, and the newlyweds together with their best persons replaced her in the vacated bedroom which, narrow as it was, still let the 4 of them dance under a cassette tape-recorder borrowed from the hostel…

When Eera and I retired to our bedroom for the nuptial first night, I turned on the transistor radio on the table under the pier mirror. The nocturnal sconce on the whitewashed wall at the foot of the bed created a flickering red twilight, like a feeble torch in the wall of medieval castle... The blanket was too thick and hot, and we threw it back, twining in the already legalized conjugal embraces. We were going on real groovy when the door to the bedroom flung open and my father-in-law stepped in to turn the radio off.

Surprised, I did not hide my nakedness, and only ceased the action. Eera also froze sitting... In the mute twinkling of the torch from the niche formed by the chiffonier in the corner, Ivan Alexeyevich, with his eyes cast down, left the bedroom. The prince of the three-room castle.

How could I know it was too loud? He could just call out from their folding coach-bed. Okay, babe, let's have another take…

3 following days all the meals were of salad Olivier, but half of it went stale all the same. And who would doubt? No way to finish off such a heap without drinking.

That's how, in outline, people get united in misalliance marriages…

~~ ~

On the whole, I liked my father-in-law, and I forgave him the absence of a minimal kit of normal tools on the shelves in the boxroom niche, as well as his distrust in my ability to repair the electric iron, relic from the Stalinist epoch. Besides, when the three-year-old world-explorer Igor pulled a handful of cannabis seeds from the hip pocket in my jeans left in the bedroom, and scattered the find on a stool in the kitchen, my father-in-law did not aggravate the exposure with unnecessary questions though, in his position at the Nezhyn Bakery Plant, he understood the varieties of grain…

The son of a Bryansk mujik, he, as an 18-year-old recruit Ivan, got caught into the "Kharkov Meat Grinder", where the German Wehrmacht, waking up after the defeat near Moscow, proved that they knew their business by crushing several Soviet armies... Stunned by the power and shocked with the spectacle of the artillery mass execution, Ivan, in the endless crowds of tens of thousands of other survivors, was taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany.

At that time there was a tacit, unspoken of, agreement between the warring parties to reimburse each other thru banks in neutral countries for the cost of keeping prisoners of war. And only the Soviet Land remained aloof from that arrangement since every captured Red Army soldier was unquestionably considered a traitor to the Soviet Homeland. Hence the difference in the *havvage* for POWs of different nations.

To feed the prisoners from the Red Army at least somehow, occasional freight trains brought to the camps agricultural products looted from the occupied Soviet territories. Among other food brought to Ivan's camp by such an echelon, there were several burlap sacks of sunflower seeds. The German guards could not guess at the purpose of the arrived product not described in any of cookbooks. When the prisoners demonstrated how to use those seeds, rational Germans were still unable to understand that the final result (chewing of a scanty grain) was not as important as the process itself – gnawing and secreting the anticipatory saliva.

So those sacks just lay around, irrationally cluttering the storage room, until one of the guards figured out how to use the seeds. He organized a sports event: a 100-meter race for a packet of seeds as the award to the winner. Under the scream-and-shout of the guard-fans, the young and tall, although as skinny as the rest of the prisoners, Ivan ran first and received his prize. In the second race, he again was out of reach, but the guard said that he had enough already, and gave

the seeds to the second to come. My father-in-law took offense and ceased to take part in the subsequent competitions, but he told me that those seeds were the most delicious in his life…

Sometimes the prisoners of war ran for 100 meters, sometimes they ran away from the camp. Then they were invariably caught, brought back and executed in front of all the other prisoners, which did not prevent the following escape attempts. Which is quite natural because sometimes there comes the feel that you don't care anymore and fuck it all. When such a moment rolled up to Ivan, he, taking into consideration the experience of previous fugitives, did not go east but turned west and, therefore, got to France.

For about 1 year a French farmer family hid him in a barn from German patrols, and when the coast was clear, he helped with the work at the farm. Once the three-year-old son of the farmer, not speaking yet any language, warned him with his gestures about the unexpected arrival of a patrol…

Then the Americans started up the Western front and liberated him. And they moved farther and farther until they brought freedom to the Ukrainian girl Gaina from her unpaid work for a well-to-do German family... When Stalin demanded from his allies to return all the Soviet citizens freed from German captivity, Americans did not argue.

Ivan and Gaina, among many other sons and daughters of the Soviet land, were brought to a French port city, where, by the way, they met each other, and were taken to Leningrad by a steamboat. The fate favored them because the overwhelming majority of the Soviet war prisoners were taken to the East by trains. On the border with the USSR, where the railway track gauge gets different, they were walked to the awaiting echelons of freight cars and brought, over the vast expanses of our Homeland, to the camps of Gulag in Siberia and the Far North.

What for? Just in case. So that their memories of what they had seen in German captivity would not spoil the picture carefully engineered in the brainwashed minds and collective memory of the Soviet people.

"Nothing is forgotten, nor anyone..."

Provided that the unforgotten matter had undergone retouching corrections by the censorship... Even I, a chump brought up on vivid examples from Soviet literature and cinema masterpieces, lost plenty of stereotypes when I got accidentally exposed to my mother-in-law’s talking on the phone to her friend, who also passed the inferno of the German captivity.

"...and do you remember how on February 23 we bought champagne and went to congratulate our pilots?.."

Ta-dah! It turns out that on the Day of Soviet Army and Navy not only secret agent Stirlitz was using alcohol in the fascist Germany, but the captured Soviet aces as well...

In Leningrad, Ivan and Gaina arranged for their marriage and directly enlisted to work in one of the Soviet Central Asian republics. That was a wise move. The subsequent purges and combing

for former prisoners of war, and other citizens who had seen a non-Soviet way of life, did not reach them out there. In the Soviet camps, they would not have to eat sunflower seeds. Our camp system, aka Zona, is the most human in the world and it does not protract your sufferings with humiliating prizes for sports achievements…

After the central press announced the elimination of the consequences of the cult of Stalin's personality, they moved to Ukraine and settled in the countryside, just in case, and from there they rose to Nezhyn.

> (...once my father tried to explain to me that the progress of life is going on in a spiral. I did not understand him, even though his index finger drew circles in the air to assist the grasping...
>
> The fate of Ivan Alexeyevich can serve as an argument in favor of that theory. In our life, we walk in a circle of the same events, but they, because of the spiral-like proceeding of life, acquire new aspects and details, so we don't recognize them when they are repeating themselves, we just move by and on, and farther.
>
> I do not know whether my father-in-law had ever been drawing any parallels between the seeds he won in the 100-meter dash and his position at the Nezhyn Bakery Plant. In both cases, it's grain disposal. But then, what would he need such a Geometry for?.)

Before stuffing a joint in front of the pier-mirror loaded upon the table in the bedroom, I, first of all, switched off the radio. The rare seeds dropping on the table top from the dried-up cannabis heads were shoved into the hip-pocket of my jeans. The Ryazan-peasantry layer in my genes balked at riddance of them right away which proved to be an unnecessary atavism because sowed at springtime in the Count's Park they didn't grow up...

In the fourth year of study I became an almost exemplary student, my classes attendance increased enormously. I couldn't bear staying in the apartment when Eera went to the institute... At the lectures, I submerged into the endless story of *Joseph and his Brothers*. It became deeper and more palpable, sort of a bass-relief of tranquil streamflow, in the wake of a joint smoked in the restroom during the break.

Under the unbearably long ding-donging final bell, I went down to the side hall on the first floor filled with the students' coats on pegs along its walls and helped Eera into hers. Then among the strident hullabaloo of donning students, I looked for a tiny piece of white fuzz on my coat, and took it off; only after that inspection, I put my coat on and we started home.

That white thread of arachnid yarn appeared on the gray fabric of my coat each time after I had a joint at the educational institution. Yes, in place of the sheepskin coat I wore a demi-saison camel coat bought from Alyosha Ocheret when he was in his final year. I did not share my discovery of the fluff phenomenon with anyone, but for myself dubbed it "God's marking a rascal"... Sometimes, to check it experimentally, I refrained from a joint at the break, and then the fluffy piece did not appear. That’s why, before putting my coat on, I checked it searching for the white mark. It never skipped its duty…

My love for Eera grew ever deeper. Sometimes she asked me not to gaze at her so steadily, especially in public, but I still hoped to stop the fluid moment.

"He gazed at her the way a dog regards a crystal vase,

the stare was answered by a look of crystal vase considering a dog..."

Occasionally, we visited the hostel for a pool at Preferans. Because of Eera's being in the family way, we did not smoke while playing; only Twoic at times, with an air of a schooled hussar cadet, asked her for kind permission and smoked to the envy of me and Slavic... And Eera, sitting with absent air on a bed by the window, would finely jag with scissors a Belomor-Canal cigarette taken from me...

She did not make a secret of her pregnancy, and still in the second month ordered from Lyalka's mother an elegant loosely fitting sarafan-shift of brown broadcloth.

Once, already in springtime, she left the hostel first, while I was tarrying in the lobby with Twoic. When I went out on the porch, Eera stood near the corner of the building in a quarrel with a student of the Biology Department drooping from a window on the second floor. Unfit to grasp the meaning of the sarafan, the dunce of a sophomore tried to pick up an unknown beauty. I demanded of him an apology to the lady but received an insolent refusal.

While I was climbing up the staircase, Twoic joined me but there were three more guys in the room. There followed a muddled battle with varying success and steady reinforcements to the inmates arriving from the neighboring rooms. I recollect a moment in the scrimmage with me standing on someone's bed while one of the opponents kept his stupid mug in front of my shoe toes begging for a kick, but I restrained myself because he wanted it too openly.

Pretty soon, I was overpowered and leveled with the floor, immobilized by the weight of 3 adversaries, yet hearing that somewhere in the corner, Twoic was still fending off the outnumbering enemy forces. And then the door flew open – Eera stood on the doorsill with a wooden ruler in her hands and issued a shrill cry, "I'll stab them all!"

I was so impressed by the absurdity of the situation—Eera's pirate warcry, that unknown ruler in her hands, and you in her belly—that I laughed. All the present followed my example.

It is not possible to fight in earnest with whom you've laughed along right now. I was helped to get up and we left…

~ ~ ~

Being unfit to immobilize the flowing moment, I had to change priorities. My task became to protect her; protect from the babel turmoil in the crowd of students putting their coats on; from the insidious viper bites of her begrudging bosom girlfriends with their snaky forked tongues, "Hi! You do look ugly today!" To guard against her fears of the things to come – they said, the

paramedic Kerdun in the maternity hospital was so cruel, every woman in labor was complaining of her afterward. And protect from so incomprehensible but negative Rh factor in Eera herself…

Protecting from all the world, ready to attack at any moment from where you do not expect, calls for being alert; so, I kept low and was on a constant look-out. That position led to my alienation from the hostel, from the course-mates, from the institute. Only with Zhomnir I still kept in touch. He was the scientific supervisor to my term work *The Means of Irony in 'The Judgment Seat' Story by W. S. Maugham*. Besides, I needed him as a means to stake off some place for me with Eera in this hostile world. He promised to take my translations for a "matchmaking" to one of the publishing houses in Kiev, where he had connections. But it had to be a collection of 20 to 25 stories in Ukrainian... So, I kept visiting his place, and he was saying in jest that his wife, Maria Antonovna, fell in love with me.

The 2 of them lived in a three-room apartment on the fifth floor in an apartment block of those along Shevchenko Street, because their children had already come of age and separated. The sons moved to Russia, and the daughter lived in Nezhyn at her husband's.

The Zhomnirs used only 2 rooms for living, the third one Alexander Vasilyevich turned into an archival study furnished with a desk, a chair, and stacks of shelves, up to the ceiling, made of mighty planking and filled with a welter of cardboard folders, books, magazines, and paper sheets, and all that stuff splashed out and piled in heaps even on the sill of the naked curtain-less window, the only one in the room... I liked it.

And I also liked Eera's story about the Zhomnir's inhuman behavior... His family lived then in the same apartment block with Eera's parents and, at renovating his flat, he divided the floor area by the number of his family members, painted his share, placed the brush in a jar with water, wished the labor successes to the rest of the family, and washed his hands...

His wife, Maria Antonovna, a noiseless woman with her hair gray to radiant whiteness, presented me with a book of poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva and made me fall in love with her poems. Before that, I believed that poetesses were only good at lace weaving, which is adding frills to rhymed lines. Marina was not like that, she knew how to rape words, when necessary.

I remembered her poetry in the local train vestibule, coming from Konotop because I remained an itinerant passenger although not every week as earlier. I felt it my duty to Lenochka; she always was a good child and I even loved her in my own way. It's only that I was never good at playing and lisping with kids and grew bored in less than 10 minutes... In the car vestibule, I had a smoke and then, all of a sudden, started to feel the lapel of my camel-hair coat. I didn't know why.

As it turned out, a long tailor's needle was hidden in the lapel corner, stuck entirely in between the fabric layers. Getting the needle out was a mighty hard job. Everything repeated itself with the second lapel.

(...a stabbed-in needle exactly as in that early poem by Tsvetaeva...)

I threw the needles out thru the slots above the glass panes in the doors of the electric train rumbling along to Nezhyn. Where did they come from? Stuck by the jealous mother like in that poem? Or bought together with the coat from Alyosha? And (most perplexing) what made me find them?

(...there's still a lot of questions that I will never find answers to. Never...)

My visits to the Zhomnirs disturbed my mother-in-law. Her main concern and worry were if they ever treated me to cooked sausage there. Apparently, she was afraid that such sausage could manipulate a person, making a zombie of them like in the "The Matrix" movie, produced by Hollywood some thirty years later.

She didn't know that I was from a new generation of robots being zombied and formatted thru printed text. And how would you like, Gaina Mikhailovna, that Zhomnir fed me a book by Hesse, in whose prose one paragraph can flow for a page and a half?

(...the possibility to affect the mundane world putting to use the leverage of text-zombied me was more than once observed and experienced personally.

Like, in the toilet of in-laws' apartment, I find *At the Steer Wheel* magazine cut up for convenient hygienic use. Sitting on the potty, I read scraps of an article about big Soviet trucks. Then I leave for the institute, get round the corner of the block and get appalled! There is no way to cross Red Partisans Street because of the growling stream of KAMAZ's and BELAZ's. They are rolling in hosts!

Of course, later they tried to put me off the track by irrelevant fibs of repair works on the Moscow highway and detouring of the traffic thru Nezhyn.

So, they waited with their repair until I found the time to read a cutting from *At the Steer Wheel*?.)

My relations with Gaina Mikhailovna fell into the traditional "son-in-law vs. mother-in-law" pattern exactly, maybe, in part refracted by the intellectual level of the participants to the template... At first, we got along in just a bright and sunny manner, but after a week or so, she suddenly began to fasten up the collar of her dressing gown with a big safety pin. The robe was for home wear with a deep cut, but I did not even notice it until that pin popped up.

The outfit transformation robbed me of the blissful unawareness, because between that pin and the first button under the cut there formed a gap, and any gaping would, naturally, catch your eye. I did not ask her previous son-in-law (Tonya's husband, Ivan, from the other bedroom) if he had observed the like symptoms before my coming to our parents-in-law's, and with what frequency. I just had to put under control the direction of my glances. Although, what was there to see? The woman had gone seedy long before…

Once, we happened to be alone in the whole apartment, just she and I. It was getting dark outside the window. She was standing with her hands behind her back leaned against the big mirror in

the wardrobe door, and telling me, seated on the folding coach-bed folded up because of the daytime, how she was being carried away to Germany in a freight-train car crammed with lots of young girls.

Clattering its iron wheels at the rail joints, the car was jostling its live load in abrupt sways. Everyone was frightened by the uncertainty of what would happen next, and they felt very thirsty. Some of the girls were crying…

The train stopped in the field. The guards threw open the doors of the cars and shouted something, but she did not know German then. In a nearby hollow there ran a stream; the guards told with their gestures they were allowed to approach the water.

They happily rushed to the stream, drank and washed their faces. Suddenly there were shouts and sharp reports of a machine gun round – one of the girls had attempted to run away and was killed.

Back to the cars they were all passed by the dead. The killed girl lay on her back with her eyes open and looked so beautiful… Dusk thickened in the room, Gaina Mikhailovna stood with her palms pressed to the surface of the mirror faded away behind her, her head drooping over the killed beauty. Now she was there and felt herself that young mournful Gaina.

I was sorry for her, and I was sorry for the killed; I wanted to say or to do something only I did not know what I could say or do. So I got up from the folding coach-bed and silently clicked the switch. The light of the 3 electric bulbs under the ceiling smashed everything into spiky shards. Instead of the frightened girl Gaina, an elderly woman stood by the wardrobe with an absurd hole beneath her collar, and unforgiving glare from under a strand of her dyed hair. Who had asked me to bust the spell? Thus, I proved to be the standardly unacceptable bastard of a son-in-law…

In fact, I never felt any particular antagonism to the mother-in-law, yet I cannot help but note that your grandmother, at times, allowed her feelings to have the upper hand over her intellect... She was unswervingly anti-Semitic. Perhaps, the years spent in the well-to-do German family were telling on her attitude to them those Jews. Folks tend to imitate the sentiments of people around them. The former Dean of the English Department, Antonyouk (who lost the position because of his guerrilla pencil-raids against the names of Bliznuke and Gourevitch in the Whatman sheets on the wall) remained a hero in her eyes. She was indignant that there were Jews all around wherever you cast a look and resented her husband's indifference to her choler caused by the escalation of Zionism.

Sitting with a newspaper in front of his massive nose and, when it's completely forgotten what exactly had been told to him, he would wake up to give you a reply, "A? Well...yes, sure." And then again his nose would drowsily get buried in the paper. That's a supporter in life for you!

In her ardent struggle against Zionism, she even went to see a newly appointed Rector – to open his eyes to the crying shame of each and every institute's Department being seized by the proliferating tribes of Israel.

(...it's ridiculous to approach Rector of the NGPI, named Arvat, a Jew from Odessa, with complaints of Jewish domination at the Nezhyn institute.

“ Eine lächerlich Wasserkunst!.”

Or how was it turned out by Rilke?..)

But life did not stand still, Eera's belly was growing with the waves from your knees and heels rolling over it. Rather firm heels you had at that time, my nose remembers that. And one day Eera in a scared tone of voice told me to call her mother... Gaina Mikhailovna entered the bedroom.

"What is it, Mummy?"

On the statuette-like smooth and impeccable skin beneath the already very large belly, there stretched shallow groovy marks.

"Tightening."

"Does it pass after the childbirth?"

Her mother lowered her head with a frown, but nothing was said…

~ ~ ~

The final examination session started but, instead of questions, they told Eera to give her Grade Book right away and entered their evaluation mark...

Late on the evening of June 14, Eera's water broke and we walked to the maternity hospital. They were surprised there that your mother came for childbirth on foot and took her to the prenatal ward, and then they brought her clothes out and passed to me. I took the clothes home and at once started back to where I left Eera, where I could no longer protect her.

About 200 meters before the maternity hospital, a bulky KAMAZ truck with switched off headlights loomed by the sidewalk. Only the triple ember-red beams atop its cab shimmered like blood-smeared scales in a dragon's crest. When I got nearer, KAMAZ suddenly sprang at me, shooting from the long puddle in the road a splash-mesh of dirty foam. I jumped up in time to make it miss... The foam-mesh croaked and died in hissing disappointment; I landed on the wet sidewalk.

Get lost, filthy dragon! Back to your lairs! There's no time for trifling with you, a more potent mission awaits me tonight.

The KAMAZ submissively roared away, heading towards Red Partisans Street…

In the waiting room, they told me the childbirth would take place in the morning and I walked outside. The maternity hospital comprised a long one-story building with the entrance from the butt wall. Near the middle of the sidewall, there stood a rounded gazebo constructed of iron pipes, it was wider than that at the construction battalion and without the pit in the center to receive cigarette butts.

I entered under its tin canopy, sat on the beams of the bench inscribed alongside the circumference of the cemented floor, and started to wait. I had nothing to do without Eera in the empty narrow bedroom of her parents' apartment.

A belated couple walked from the gate to the entrance of the maternity hospital; soon after the man went back to the gate alone. So, not only we were arriving on foot; probably, because such a day it was.

The full moon shone in all of its glory high above the hospital roof... I smoked a joint, and the moon turned into a distant exit from a long tunnel with pulsating walls.

The wide-open window of the delivery room looked straight at the gazebo. I figured out its purpose from the fine mosquito net which dimmed the light when they turned it on inside, and screams of a woman in labor broke out into the night. It was not Eera shouting, not her voice. Maybe, the one from the couple who came after us.

When the room got silent and the light turned off, I went to the waiting room. What if the voice sounds different at childbirth?. They told me it was not the time yet…

I never stuffed another joint; the one at the vigil start remained the only that night. When screams started anew, I recognized the dear voice – it was Eera!

After it was over and the light in the delivery room out, I came to the waiting room and they told me it was not the time yet and then sent me to the window of the prenatal ward on the other side of the building. Eera raised herself to the windowsill and from under her half-dropped eyelids, she incredulously looked to see that I was still there. She told me to leave because the childbirth would be at nine.

Of course, she did not know that I was protecting her from this world with its KAMAZ-dragons and merciless paramedics. "Kerdun on the shift?"

"No."

I returned to the gazebo... There I sat squeezing in the cupped hands the quiver in my shoulders to ward off the chill of night...

In the murky predawn twilight, the circle of the gazebo floor was suddenly crossed by a strange dark ball pushing a white cylinder before itself. Only when it disappeared into the grass, I guessed that it was a hedgehog whose muzzle got stuck in an ice-cream paper cone.

The rays of invisible sun touched the white clouds high above; soon it wouldn't be so awfully cold. From the center in the gazebo roof, a fine thread of web plumbed down precipitated by the weight of a big spider on its end. No sooner he touched the floor than the air space of the gazebo was cut thru by a sparrow flying in the direction marked by the muzzle-covered hedgehog. The spider followed them.

(...I can see signs, but—what a pity!—I cannot read them.

Spider, bird, hedgehog... The three Magi?..)

In the delivery room, someone started screaming again. When the screams died down, two women called me from behind the sheer veil of the mosquito net to come up. One of them held the baby in her uplifted hands; something was dangling between the tiny legs.

"Son!" I had time to think.

"Congratulations to your daughter!"

"Navel cord," corrected I myself…

The mother-in-law met me with a smile and congratulations, she had already called the maternity hospital on the phone.

Borrowing money from Tonya, I ran to the Bazaar. It was a serious banknote of 25 rubles, she hadn't smaller ones by her at the moment. I flounced about the Bazaar, buying up bouquets of roses; roses, I wanted only roses, nothing but roses. Until the blank click in the run out clip of 25 rubles.

Then I hurried back to the hospital embracing that bale of bouquets. The one-legged cripple, on his crutches by the five-story block of the mother-in-law, smiled at me happily – he knew where I was hurrying to.

The nurse at the maternity hospital had to call two more of her colleagues to help her to take the flowers from the waiting room to the inner corridor. Later, Eera told me that she was still lying then in that corridor on the gurney and they heaped the roses over the bedsheet covering her but not for too long because they had to take her to the wardroom where flowers were not allowed... Then nurses and midwives shared those bouquets to take them home; one bouquet went to the paramedic Kerdun who came on her shift in the morning. Who cares? The most important thing that you were born.

"...a million, a million, a million of scarlet roses..."

~ ~ ~

(...Egyptologists are still arguing why the beautiful female faces of sphinxes are endowed with those hanging beards...)

The explanation was demonstrated by Eera. Though, at first, she demonstrated you, from behind the windowpane. The white fabric tightly wrapped all around you except for the circle of the face with your eyes in an obstinate squint. The same fabric covered Eera's hair, and half of her face was hidden with a bandanna-wide mask, like by the bank robbers, only white. She took you away somewhere, and then returned to the window and said thru the glass, that your eyes were the bluest blue but that you were already asleep after feeding.

To say this, she untied the upper strings of the mask, leaving the lower ones in place and the released cloth hung under her chin.

(...a beautiful face and an odd beard under it! The sphinxes have just fed their cubs!

That's what the ancient Egyptians wanted to bring over...)

When back at the apartment on Red Partisans, I was struck by the horrific look of the door to our narrow bedroom. How could I not see earlier all that dirt and mud splashes, and that long single hair hanging from a mud clump stuck to the door at a half-meter up from the floor? I heated some water and washed the door on both sides and then the window frame too, from inside. When Tonya gave me the carriage of her children, so that you would have where to sleep, I washed it as well taking into the yard under the bedroom window. And there I realized that it was the right thing to do when from out the folds in the collapsible top I picked out a piece of dried baby’s cack. No, I did not say anything to anyone, no one had anything to do with it, that was a part of sorting it out between me and the world in our single combat…

At the institute, Eera still had one more final examination. If it were missed, she would have to wait one whole year so as to take it together with the following graduating course. However, you were born very conveniently – right after the previous exam and there followed a week set aside for reading up between the examinations plus three more days, because there were four groups at a course, and they were not examined on the same day but one after another which amounted to 10 days allowed for your stay in the hospital.

On the sixth day of your life, Eera came to the waiting room and said that you were already all right, and the danger of jaundice, because of the different Rh factor in your parents, was over, and you were ready to be taken home any moment they say so. I kicked up tempestuous activity running to the Head of the maternity hospital with demands to discharge you both immediately on behalf of the state examination to be taken by the mother. The Head began to hesitate only she said they needed a go-ahead from another maternity boss, sitting in one of the lanes branching off Shevchenko Street.

From an unfamiliar nurse who happened to come to work by her bicycle which was slumbering now leaned in a shady spot against the wall until the end of her shift, I borrowed it and drove over there. In the unattainable height of the bottomless sky hung a few clouds shaped like spiraling galaxies over the bus stops, where already started to accumulate the end-of-day lines of

passengers. The bike swept past, like the besom of Margarita riding to the ball of Satan... When I jumped off it by the small maternity office lurking in a lane, the witch's son of a bitch kicked me in the groin with its back wheel and neighed in vicious cheer, mutely but spitefully.

I ran into the office to surprise two women peacefully idling last minutes of their working day. Taming my breath, I started the same negotiations. They made a telephone call somewhere and flatly announced – no discharge without BCG, the next day they'd vaccinate you and then set us free.

On the way back, I drove much slower, dejectedly fixing the bike's chain that fell off awfully often. When the bicycle was returned to the owner, I went to the waiting room to find Tonya there. I started to convince her that we could easily kidnap both Eera and the baby, only I had to go and fetch Eera's clothes.

Tonya sprinkled me with the knitted belt of her jacket, the way exorcist priests do when busy with their job. The belt was dry, of course, but all the same I stopped freaking Tonya out, though I knew perfectly well that if I did not get Eera out of there that day, I would lose her.

Eera came to the room and, in turn with Tonya, explained it to me that just one day did not mean anything. It was evening already. I saw Tonya to my parents-in-law's, but I couldn't stay in the bedroom even with its thoroughly rinsed door...

I returned back to the maternity hospital but did not enter the gazebo; I wouldn't stand another night of listening to the animal howling of women in childbirth. So I went to the night watch, like the last in the field from the squad of guarding knights of Uncle Chernomor.

I walked in a slow, dilatory, pace because ahead there still was a whole night which turned out so dark, that bypassing the five-story block of Zhomnir, I stepped into a deep pot-hole puddle on the sidewalk, with my right foot. Pfui! Though deft in dodging the dragon, next to the lair of Laban I screwed it up so ingloriously.

I did not stop till reaching the water pump across the road from the locked gate of Nezhyn Vegetable Cannery, where I had the foot ablution and also washed the soaked sock. A cavalcade of buses, brightly lit from inside, rumbled from round the turn to the Progress Plant; they jostled past void of any passengers. I firmly squeezed the water out of my sock and put it back on.

In that manner, one sock dry and the other wet, yet both hidden beneath my pants, I reached the station. A knight vigilant should never stop in his watch round.

I walked a couple of circles in the half-dark and fully empty ticket-office hall with its floor-tiles wrapped in nighttime sending back tiny hollow echoes to my delayed steps. Another circle was performed in the waiting room filled with silent motionless figures of people seated on the benches.

Past the locked canteen-restaurant, I went to the second floor to coast thru the waiting rooms up there. Never before had I noticed how strangely change at night the look of people's eyes. Not by

everyone though, yet some of them gazed thru the eyes glazed by some uncanny gloss. The ones of those weird looks got startled by my appearance; they tried to hide the unearthly glare in their eyes, but I could easily make them out within the sitting rows of unsuspecting passengers half-asleep in the massive night silence of the station... Behave yourselves, glassy-eyed! The guard is on the watch!.

The rain caught up with me beneath the lights on pillars over the empty traffic bridge. A quiet summer rain it was. I did not intend to go to Pryluky, so reaching the city limit I turned back and walked to Red Partisans. The rain was not increasing and not ceasing either. We strolled on together at the same laggard pace...

The door was opened by Ivan Alexeyevich; Gaina Mikhailovna was peeping from the dark of the unlighted living room. "Where are you roving? It’s raining outside."

"The rain is warm."

"Maybe, I'll beat you?"

"Not worth it."

In the bedroom, I dropped all wet clothes off and lay down naked. As in all the previous nights without Eera, I spread her nightie full length and enclosed in my hug so that I could protect her even absent from by my side... Much later, I learned that the in-laws concluded I was whoring on that night…

Next day in the afternoon, I carried you from the hospital, wrapped in a quilted silk blanket and some frilled tulle. Eera walked alongside, with a bouquet which Tonya had bought in advance. But the flowers in it were not roses…

~ ~ ~

Her final examination, Eera passed with another group from her course. I waited for her by the columns on the high porch and, embracing by the waist, helped her down the steep steps. She wore a yellow knitted jacket with three-quarter sleeves. The head of my group, Lyda, who happened about, was watching us from aside with an empathetic smile in her face...

That yellow jacket I liked and got it by chance. Eera told me then that they brought goods to the department store in the main square, and sent me to see what was on sale. As usual on such occasions, the store was densely crammed with a heated crowd. The jacket was the last one and exactly Eera's size, yet while I was being happy about so good luck, it was grabbed by some girl and her mother. Sneaky villagers!

The girl tried the jacket on and looked inquiringly at her mother, who was holding the daughter’s raincoat. On that department store visit, Slavic kept me company. So, we stepped aside and started to exchange comments, "Not bad, but the sleeves are way too short."

"Yeah, let's look for something else."

The mother shook her head, and the girl reluctantly took off the jacket. I snatched it at once and sent Slavic to knock out the check.

Eera even liked that it was a three-quarter jacket... All that was before you…

And for your birth, following the elegant, time-honored, Slavonic tradition, I had to treat my friends to *magarich*. In the restaurant Seagull by the same-named hotel in the main square, Slavic, Twoic and I shared a couple of decanters with vodka. The waitress had a skirt of white and black stripes on, and Twoic liked it when I defined her outfit as a stringy piece of cloth. He demanded a toast.

"It's not just birth," announced I, "but the start of new life, and since life is nothing but a transition from one form to another let's drink to that the newborn, as well as we, will fill our lives up with beautiful forms."

Twoic started to croak that the idea of form transitions was ripped by me off Thomas Mann, whose *Joseph and his Brothers* he also happened to read, which was my fault, I had put him on the trail to the book at the institute library.

My next toast was to a girl with beautiful blue eyes, I meant you.

Yet, Twoic pulled a clever look on his rustic mug and started a lecture about some causal genes—a smart ass from the Biology Department—and that the color would change in a month to brown, possibly dark-brown. Some Bio-Fac bastard with his causal genes!.

Before getting their diplomas and workplace appointments, all the institute graduates were summoned to the assembly hall in the New Building. We had to sit thru a usual blah-blah about keeping high the NGPI honor wherever we get distributed by our appointments.

Than a black-haired stranger took the floor and said that each of us was given, on entering the hall, a sheet of paper and a pencil, right? Now, it should be admitted that not everything's straight as it should be in our schools. So, let us write about what we, the graduates, did not like in the schools we had practices at, or even earlier, or even when we ourselves were still school students. Just any occasion when some teacher behaved incorrectly, in our opinion, or allowed themselves incorrect statements. To make it easier to start, let's use the phrase, "And I still remember how..." after which it would go on by itself, okay?

His educative speech left me stunned with awe and realization of how deeply backward I stayed. The KGB had obviously upgraded to the conveyor-system technologies in the production of secret collaborators. Hundreds of rats hatched in just one sitting! And no need to use the bait of spy school individually.

(...in each of us, there lurks a small frightened animal hidden deep inside and thinking logically: "If I don't write they can cancel my diploma or fork out the appointment to the worst of stinking holes. It's better to write – one time does not count."

But that time of no account is, actually, just the start. Later, in the hole you were appointed to, they will come up and show you your essay, and dictate the next...)

Okay, bitches, you'll get it written!. In the back of each seat in the assembly hall, there was installed a rectangular hinged piece of plastic, a kinda mini-desktop. I brought down the one in the back of the seat before me, placed the crisp sheet of paper on the smooth plastic surface, and wrote:

"And I still remember how in the fourth grade my Class Mistress, Seraphima Sergeevna, stated:

'Well done, Sehrguey! You collected most of the waste paper.'

And I was filled with pride and joy."

I signed my final report to the KGB with my real name and I am proud of it till now...

~ ~ ~

(...The great discovery of Karl Marx about the emergence of surplus-value, remained, as it, unfortunately, is, not pushed to all of its potential limits. He quite correctly noted that some part of his working time a laborer toils for himself, and the remaining part for the factory owner. Good fellow, Karl, hit the bulls-eye!. However, that's not all there is there to it.

The main (yet unnoticed) trick lurks in the fact, that it is impossible to determine who exactly the laborer toils for at this or that part of a split second. And this, not yet perceived (although indisputable) truth is applicable not only to the methods of production but to any other sphere of human activities as well.

(*Hopefully, I'm not advancing too fast, and you are in time to stick down your notes? Okay, proceed to the full-stop, while I'm opening the second bottle...*)

Hence, we can safely state, that there are no bad guys in the world, but there are no good guys either. An elusive, uncatchable, fraction of a second separates good from evil.

Well, so you think that guy is a good man? I love your innocence! Stay assured, you're still alive only because of meeting him in the right part of the second. Some tiny pinch of time earlier or later, and that vampire would have dropped aside your lifeless corpse already, with your blood system sucked-up dry and lymph nodes gnawed to tatters!.

Or let's take those same witches queuing to be burned at the stake and illuminate the darkness of the Middle Ages. The gloomy blockheads of executioners could not understand that they were burning not the right ones, and at the wrong moment.

My point is, no matter how – at the stake, on the pale, in the guillotine, on the electric chair, in the gallows, against a wall facing the firing squad... well, whatever!.. they always execute the guiltless. These are not those ones, those were not these. No!. Wait!. Oops... Too late… The pattern iterates in the same endless vicious loop...

But even those, at the moment of wrong-doing, were simply order-executing tools. Whose orders? Who were they toiling for? Well, if I had the answer to that question, would I be still living here, eh?

One thing is clear, though. Between the tool engaged at the operation end and the don of mafia there lies a chain of several links making the "who" practically untraceable. Because, if we paraphrase the favorite expression of my Uncle Vadik, which he picked at the history classes in School 13:

"a zombie of my zombie is not my zombie"...)

Hearing your heartrending cry from the bedroom, I rushed there and was just in time. You were wriggling in the carriage under the open leaf in the window, and your grandmother, drooping over you, went on with her incantation, "Little angel! Little angel!" While you were getting torn apart in screams.

"Gaina Mikhailovna! She's not an angel but a girl!"

In her responding glance, there glinted the malice from the one who had sent her, but lacking arguments to refute my statement, she silently left.

I knew for sure that prevailing upon a baby whose infirm psyche hasn't got adequate training, who, as of yet, too feebly orients herself in the world, was wrong, especially persuading her that she was an angel. And more so under the window open widely! Like, inviting – fly to where it's nice, where angels like you frisk and flutter around happily!

I started to convince you that you were a girl named Lille and nothing of an angel at all. You still kept crying but not so desperate as before when the soul was being wrenched in efforts to escape the mortal body.

Yet, what was the matter? I put you onto the bed and unwrapped the swaddle; you cried on, arching your infant torso... The reason was found in the soles of the tiny feet both wearing the stretches of whitish arachnoid fiber like those rascal-marking fluffs on my camel's-hair coat. I rinsed them off. Blinking your blue eyes in surprise, you calmed down. I swaddled you back again and took over to the carriage where you peacefully fell asleep…

Ironing your swaddles was my responsibility so that I would keep everything under control, watched closely. And it was also me to hang them, after washing, out over the common linen ropes in the apartment-block yard.

The ropes ran from the central pillar like spokes from a wheel hub. It's where I learned that I had allies in this world because alone I would hardly solve the problem of hanging swaddles the right way. I mean it, really, which way to put them on the rope – face down or back down? I put the first one this way, the second upside-down. And that very moment, a white dove came from above, lit on the central pillar and cooed in protest.

Aha! Thank you, friend! I'll keep to the instruction!

Since then I was hanging a whole load of swaddles homogeneously…

Zhomnir suddenly lost all of his interest in my translations from Maugham. He cut off his usual cheerful threats to take them one of these days to "matchmaking" in Kiev. Instead of encouragements, there came languid explanations that it was necessary to take into account the ongoing changes in conjuncture. That the following year there would be the centenary of another English writer. Translations from that one would be much easier to shove thru. And Maugham, actually, was a gay person...

Well, let's say, rendering the story about a young suicide pianist, I was able to figure out his orientation by myself. However, in what gutter would this here best of the worlds be today without the gay composer Tchaikovsky? Either Maugham or nothing!

Alexander Vasilyevich shrugged his shoulders…

In the living room at Red Partisans in the presence of Gaina Mikhailovna, I complained to Eera about Zhomnir's double-dealing. They both knew about my ambiguous ambitions to become a literary translator. Eera started pathetic exclamations while my mother-in-law, without any comment, went out to Tonya's bedroom and returned with a powder box. She opened it, powdered her face in front of the mirror in the wardrobe door, and took it back in the same tacit manner. That's all.

In the evening, Zhomnir rang the doorbell and invited me to go out with him into the yard. His bicycle leaned against the house wall by the staircase-entrance. Under the dark foliage of the thick Cherry crowns behind the common linen ropes, twilight was already gathering and creeping towards the hung laundries. From the neighboring apartment block sounded The Eagles' Hotel California:

"Warm smell of colitas rising up in the air..."

I did not know at that time what a tragically creepy end the song had, and simply was getting on high from the concluding guitar break...

Zhomnir obviously envied the atmosphere around, but then he started to talk business. As it stood, my translations had ceased to be mere scribbling, yet still remained in a ballpark, kinda a beta version. He did not insist on changing the author, but let them be upgraded to the alpha...

He left, and I respectfully admired the skills of the old school. With all their ignorance about the textual formatting of the world, and with the naive belief in bewitching thru the cooked sausage, yet just a single powdering was enough to overpower Zhomnir and seize him by the gills! Well done, mother-in-law!.

Apart from the baby's security considerations, the swaddle ironing was needed to pass the time... Eera, as a mother with a newborn, was exempt from working off for her diploma. I got an appointment somewhere in the Transcarpathia. The exacter location was not of much concern to me because I did not plan to work at school in any place at any time. So, Gaina Mikhailovna (since I was so brave) came up with an idea to follow the example of Komsomol members from the earlier generations who recklessly went to erect new cities that were not yet on the map. And, by the way, there was an article in the newspaper that nearby Odessa they started to build a new city-port of Yuzhny...

It was decided that I would go there as soon as you became one month old because it was still not easy for Eera to keep you single-handed. Thus, I was whiling away the pre-launch month with the swaddles and walking the carriage, where you were sleeping in. Only I had to keep to the strict instructions and never-never move the tulle cover fixed on the raised top to screen the baby inside. And after the month expired, and you passed your medical examination, the tulle could be removed and substituted with a traditional safety pin for keeping safe from evil eye…

My brother Sasha came on a visit from Konotop, and you had your debut visit to the Count's Park. Eera and Slavic joined us also. By the park lake, Slavic and I sparked a joint but my brother never blew jive.

We returned thru the narrow gate by the building of the Musical Pedagogical Department. The gate's jambs were connected with an iron strip welded some 10 inches above the ground, like a stile impeding the passage of the carriage. I, in spacey sluggish manner, asked Slavic for help to move the carriage over, but no sooner had he reached out for its handle than Sasha barked brutally at him, "Get off with you!"

Slavic coweredly obeyed, and you were carried over the stile by me and Sasha. I felt pleased and proud to have such a brother, and also glad that you had such sort of an uncle who wouldn't leave his niece to Slavic…

Your next appearance to the Park took place on the arrival of Eera's brother from Kiev. Igor came together with his wife who kept chewing his ear all the time while he, in a soft good-natured manner, smoothed away the spiky wrinkles she turned out of nothing. I thought then it might be because of her PMS but later I learned that she had that PMS for life, without a break.

During the walk, she kept flinging her umbrella open every other minute, and then the rain started to drizzle. When she did it for the dozenth time, Eera also got it about the cause and effect

and asked her sister-in-law not to open the umbrella anymore. Igor's wife was happy to be noticed and appreciated, she left the umbrella alone and on our way back there was no rain…

In his family, Ivan Alexeyevich enjoyed the handle of Prince, and he was pleased with it. A natural reaction of a peasant son to getting such a title. And he looked princely too, especially when, well-nourished and imposing, he sat in a white tank top and blue sportswear pants next to a newspaper, wide open in his hands. So the handle was, like, a compliment to tickle his pride, and he certainly deserved it because he was a getter.

In the era of deficits not only wedding suits were hard to be acquired but different other types of products too. So getters was getting them... Once my father-in-law even fetched and dropped in the kitchen a whole sack of buckwheat, by the central heating battery beneath the windowsill.

In the corner to the left from the window, there was installed the gas stove, the titan for water boiling occupied the right corner, so that sack of buckwheat filled the center completing the composition to advantage. And that was a righteous lump of pride too, because other folks had to go for a special trip to Moscow to buy that product, and suddenly in a kitchen of provincial Nezhyn a whole sack of buckwheat!

> (...same sort of pride that some people get from a hunting trophy, like a pair of tusks, a sword sawed off a fish, or such thick branching...well, ahem...which, in general, can also be fixed in the wall...)

Okay, getter, if so is your disposition, then tickle your pride for a week, let's say two, or even a month bypassing that f-f..er..I mean, fabulous sack in the kitchen, but it had stuck there already for so long that even the mother-in-law started to grumble just to receive his usual response, "A? Well, yes..." before he buried himself back in the newspaper...

But then in the messy pile of newspapers alongside the TV on the table, a certain headline caught my eye. I did not read the article itself but the headline suggested that there was some archaeological subject. The main thing, I liked the headline for some reason, so short and sweet and to the point. It somehow reminded me of the toilet room cut-outs' exhibition in the Hosty.

I picked the paper up and folded it in a certain way so that only the headline would stay in view. It was bedtime already but I still dropped to the kitchen for a second and with a caressing gesture—there even was some faggish tint to it—I put the newspaper on the sack of buckwheat. On the way out, I put the light off leaving behind in the darkness the sack headlined

The Prince's Tomb

I mean, as a son-in-law I was a regular SOB, yet the next morning the sack faded in the woodwork before my getting up…

The day before I was leaving to participate in erecting a new city, I went to Konotop to see Lenochka who was in the pioneer camp by the Seim. After she confirmed that I was her father, the caretaker of her platoon allowed us to go out of the campgrounds.

In the Pine forest, Lenochka picked up a long gray feather of an unknown bird, and I thrust it into her smooth hair where it stayed as if fixed.

> (...Indians are no fools – such feathers make a person the part of the free wild world, establishing involvement, contact, and mutual tacit understanding...)

When we were coming back to the camp civilization, a gust of wind ran up from behind and softly took the feather out of her hair to drop it down onto the thick carpet of old Pine needles on the ground. She did not even notice it.

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Parade of Planets

On the Day D, aka my departure day, everything hung on a thread, more precisely, on a single cobweb fiber. I got it at once on entering the staircase-entrance vestibule to spark a joint because I never smoked in the apartment, not even vanilla cigarettes. The cobweb thread hung from the upper crossbar in the cracked entrance-door frame, stretched tautly downward by the weight of a burned match dangling from its end... How long could it last?.

It was I, who always stuffed burned matches up in the gap between the frame-top and the whitewashed plaster on the wall because there was no trash bin in the staircase-entrance vestibule. After Tonya's toddler son had exposed my connection to cannabis, I did not care what might be sniffed out by the passers-by in the smoke I left in the vestibule... Would the cobweb thread hold on until I get away?.

I looked from the sultry shade in the staircase-entrance out into the yard. A squadron of black ravens coasted lowly thru the heat-melted sky. Heading north-east, they did not move their wings —made all too reluctant even for the slightest effort—the feathers at their wing-tips stuck out kinda rigid spikes harrowing the hot breeze... Could I get thru?.

Eera was seeing me to the station. When we started for the bus stop, from a balcony in the neighboring five-story block Alla Pugacheva sobbed up after me in her latest hit:

> ***"Please, come back for at least a day!.."***

I did not have much luggage – a briefcase with a book of stories by W. S. Maugham in English (soft pink cover, Moscow publishing house "The Enlightenment"), the Hornby's Learners' Dictionary, a thin copy-book of 12 sheets with a stub at translation of "The Rain" story by Maugham (4 pages of a rough pencil draft made hard to read by manifold corrections), the

employment history book (the first entry made on September 13, 1971, at Konotop Locomotive and Car Repair Plant), the passport, the military ID, and shaving accessories.

The briefcase was accompanied by the blue sports-bag with a shoulder strap, containing a change of underpants, two tank tops, a pair of shirts, jeans, and the geologist jacket, sewn by my mother of hard green tarp... Boarding the local train, I threw them onto the car-long rack of thin tubes running above the windows and went back to the platform.

Eera was nervous that the doors would slam shut and the train leave without me. I climbed up one step to the car vestibule and stood there, holding a grip on the nickel-plated vertical railing, "I've left something on the windowsill, let it be there till I'm back."

"What's that?"

"Look for yourself. I'll be back exactly in a month."

"Call at once as you've arrived!"

It was the last car on the train. An old woman ran up along the platform. She asked something but I neither listened nor wanted to, I was looking at Eera until the speakers in the car shouted, "Beware! The doors are shutting!" And they cut me off her.

The electric train pulled and, gaining the speed, rumbled along the rails in the direction of Kiev…

The night before, I went out shopping together with Eera. The department store was locked already, but the glazed stall by its side still worked. From the sitting inside middle-aged gypsy woman, I bought a new safety razor, a shaving brush, a stand-up mirror, and two handkerchiefs with a series of pin-thick blue wavy lines printed across their fields and leaving out only thin circular frames in the center. Both size and looks of the handkerchiefs were quite alike except for the pictures inside those frames – a small sailing boat in one, a neat blue anchor in the other. In my pocket, I was carrying away the handkerchief with the sailing boat, its counterpart with the anchor was left on the windowsill. Coming back, I would put their circles to each other, the boat to the anchor. It would be the ritual of return…

And pretty late at night, my mother-in-law suddenly freaked out and started anxiously persuade me there was no need to go anywhere, and it was still possible to return the train ticket Kiev-Odessa to the booking ticket-office at the station.

I thought I was going to lose it – what ticket return, eh? Eera and Tonya also joined the conversation, only the father-in-law was out, called to the situation at the Bakery Plant.

Staring at the oilcloth on the table, Gaina Mikhailovna was mumbling about a too complicated moment, so that even Ivan couldn't get thru... A week before, Tonya's husband Ivan left for the

Transcarpathia, yet without ever reaching there, he returned from Kiev a day later—I couldn't get it why—and now he was all the time hiding away in the bedroom with the children of their family.

By that time, I had grasped already that the whole world was in the state of tumultuous fracas, amid some unceasing battle in progress – but who against who? That was some question! Because all of that went on under wraps, beneath the surface presenting only the conventional layer of casual life. Still, thru occasional rinds and gaps in the disguising cover, there at times glimpsed certain inconsistencies, secret signs, and I already started to understand that the true reality consisted of something surpassing the customary limits of commonplace views we were brought up to keep to, and those my guesses were affirmed by the instances when people let things out, and pretty frequent too.

Was I sure they were exactly people? Well, I did not have another name for them... Letting out? What namely? What about?. About things that did not belong to the life which we were taught to see and no deeper.

...Ivan unable to get thru...(repealed on his emissary mission)...and whose side are you on?. (the fire at the Bakery Plant just an episode in the universal battle)...

I had to find the ways and means for collecting the strewn puzzle pieces of concomitant reality, turn them into some-wieldy-thing, without getting lost on the way midst all chance hints of recondite raw truth. Who's for who? Who's against who?.

A thunderstorm broke behind the black window in the living room. The ramble of falling water outside got overpowered again and again by thunderclaps fighting blindly in the flicker of mighty flashes. A pillar of enormously white light struck the transformer box in the yard. And the pitch-black darkness engulfed all around.

Tonya groped her way to their bedroom to calm down the children and Ivan. When she came back with a burning candle, I saw in its feeble light that I was talking to Mothers. Those very Mothers mentioned, in all too cautious, cut-and-run, manner by Goethe... Three Mothers were they: the old yet powerful, the middle, and the beginner – Eera. She was not my ally, she was one of them. I needed to persuade them, otherwise, nothing would come out.

With the storm raging outside, behind the blinking candle reflection in the panes of black glass, I still managed to get their go-ahead... In conclusion, their eldest, the leader said, "If something goes completely awry...in a hopeless, extreme, situation...turn to the very Head..."

At night I had a prophecy dream... I lay on a gurney, trying to become inconspicuous in the cold and dim fluorescent light flooding from everywhere thru the pale gray, semi-translucent, ceiling and walls, so as to exclude the slightest possibility for even a sliver of a shadow. A group of someones in white robes stood all about me. The one standing out of view, behind my head, asserted, "If not for the fat, it still might come out..." Even without seeing, I knew that the one in the white who pronounced that was also I. With a furtive glance from under my half-closed

eyelids at the stomach of me lying raw upon the gurney, I saw thru the sheer skin a thin yellowish layer, probably, the fat I was talking about…

I went out into the train car vestibule and sparked. Thru the sky of dusty glass in the automatic doors, a small harem of seahorses floated with their tails curled forward under their bellies. Lined from the taller mare to the smallest colt, they were also fond of a system, like the lost figurines of white elephants. The train hurriedly raced ahead, yet couldn't leave their formation behind...

A man entered the vestibule with a dangling row of medals on his civilian jacket breast. A war veteran; here's the one who once knew who's for who, who's against who. We shot the breeze for a while without advancing any particular line of thought until at one of the stops, a man with a bundle of long thin planks in his hands stepped in from the platform. He carried his load between us 2 and went on into the car. The veteran freaked out, his staring eyes stuck to something in the upper corner behind me. I knew that there was nothing there, but since he saw it, then there it was. I left them to sort it out between themselves and followed the fascia-bearer into the car, to the window under the rack carrying my things, because Kiev was running towards our train…

~ ~ ~

At the station, I took my luggage to the cool huge underground checkroom hall. Then I came back up to the hot surface of the station square in whose right corner I slipped thru the inconspicuous passage leading to the steep and long stair flights that descended to the canteen once shown to me and Olga by Lekha Kuzko.

At the bottom of stairs, I sparked and went on, but had to stop smoking, when a platoon of militiamen poured out of the canteen and marched towards me along the sidewalk, so that I had to pad thru their ranks, with a smoldering joint between my fingers…

From the canteen, I returned to the station and took a walk-round. There were not so many glass-eyed as on the night watch at the Nezhyn station, probably, because of the different time of day. Still, there were some and at my approach, they hurriedly pretended that they were there just so, kinda ornery passengers.

I went up to the third floor where there was the mother-and-child room and explained to the watchwoman that in a month I would be passing their station together with my wife and baby daughter, and now I dropped in to check the conditions. Well, in general, rather a clean corridor, thank you.

Near the toilet rooms on the first floor, a young militiaman with a black eye of deep purple hue took pains to avoid the least eye contact with me, although both of us perfectly knew that his black eye resulted from my walking thru their formation and that he, who had suffered in the universal battle, would not forgive me that.

Then, for quite a stretch, I stood in the waiting hall on the second floor, in front of the huge news stall counter keeping heaps of diverse newspapers, magazines, postal envelopes. But all that time I looked at just one postcard with the bluest blue sky in its picture.

It was a long wait until there at last sounded footsteps behind me, barely audible in the joint buzz of the crowd filling the hall... My eyes stayed fixed at the picture. The footsteps stopped. A copper coin the size of an eye iris fell from behind my back onto the blue in the postcard. Only then I turned and went away without ever looking back – from that moment on no casual genes would ever be able to change the color of your eyes. And only then it was, that the station loudspeakers' call broke thru to me:

"The train Kiev-Odessa departs from the third platform. We ask escorting citizens to leave the cars."

Needless to make any special point that at those, communicationally underdeveloped, old simple days, even the bravest minds could neither imagine, in however sprightly fantasy flights, nor dream about installation of surveillance cameras in public places. Then, given the conditions of the aforesaid period, what else could cause the ungraspable scene which took place the same evening in the queue of passengers lined at the bus stop in front of the Kiev intercity bus station? There might be solely one reasonable explanation – the vigilance of the taxi driver.

> (...the derivative of "reason" here is used without any deeper connotations but in compliance to its since long established core signification, that of correlating the details of surrounding reality in congruence with the linear, orthodoxly perceived, and conventionally evaluated, modifications of the standard cause-effect prototype.
>
> However, at that particular period I was beyond the old-time etiology because of a too deep submergence in tracing and angling up the intricate complexities from the sketchy, haphazardly twined, chain of transcendental symbols and signs of varying significance, confronting me at random flicks of revelations, which goaded to strive and grope with might and main for a new, elusive, but incisive and tantalizingly close level in apprehensive comprehension of the recondite world wrapped in the disguising sham of make-believe reality, so as to find, thru those acumen insights, a firm footing for ensuring my function in general scheme of things if only I would discover it and assess properly because "often the edges are apt to lift, briefly, and we see things we were not meant to.." quoting a commendable American transcendentalist...)

Now, back to the taxi driver in the cabstand by the steps to the underground checkroom hall at the Kiev railway station for the trains of long-distance destination... At 17.06 a young man of about twenty-five-to-seven years old, height one-meter seventy-six-to-eight centimeters, with straight brown hair, and a trimmed mustache, emerged from the underground passage. He wore a gray jacket and gray pants, not matching though the shade of gray in the jacket. Noticeably upset about something, the man got into the taxi and suggested the driver go down to the underground

hall instead of him, and bring a briefcase and a bag from the indicated automatic storage cell, the code to which he would provide. The driver, naturally, refused.

The dark-haired individual fell into a reverie, twisting a burnt match in the fingers of his right hand, then sighed, broke that match, asked to wait a bit and disappeared down the passage steps. Five minutes later, he appeared again and asked to take him to the intercity bus station. Upon arrival at the specified location, he paid, hung the sports-bag over his left shoulder, gripped the briefcase handle with the same-side hand, and slammed the door. Synchronously and, like, accidentally, he wiped nickel-plated door handle with the right hem of his jacket destroying, by all the canons of criminal films, his fingerprints. After those manipulations, the man disappeared into the entrance to the intercity bus station.

What could the driver do? Of course, he, naturally, called the operative who he was secretly collaborating with, under the operational pseudonym "Tractor".

What was witnessed by the queue of passengers at the bus stop to which I joined coming back from the bus station building, after a visit to the men's toilet and a five-minute pit-stop in the middle of the empty lobby to stare at the multi-square-meter billboard "Fly by the Aeroflot!" with a stewardess wearing her most happy smile and the blue uniform piss-cutter in it?

Nearby the stop, a freshly washed red Zhiguli car pulled up abruptly. A man wearing dark sunglasses got out of it, came up to me and, holding out the ignition key in the bunch with divers other ones, instructed, "Get in the car, we'll go right now."

Keeping mum, I turned away. The man proceeded to the bus station building.

Soon after, 2 young men emerged from behind the right corner of the building—one of them in the militia uniform, the other wearing plainclothes—both of whom took a position on the right off the queue. Round the left corner, the same man in sunglasses came together with a short companion in a thick-fabric cap; they stopped on the other side of the queue. The man in the cap (an obvious scumbag and tipsy as well) mixed with the line of passengers and approached me. He started rubbing against me from behind. The nearest passengers watched in bewilderment.

That disgusting scene was interrupted by the appearance of a bus with the inscription "Polyot" on its side... On the way to the Borispol airport, I did not respond to the puzzled looks of the fellow-travelers, returning with my mental gaze to what had not been recorded by the then-non-existent (and, therefore, absent) surveillance camera in the men's toilet room of the Kiev intercity bus station.

I went up to the sloping trough of the common urinal and poured into it the mustard-brown powder of all the dope I had on me. Then I crumpled its packing sheet of paper and threw it to the trash-bin. The way I was taught by the French criminal movies starring Belmondo.

> (...which is the evidence that I can be programmed not only by means of a text but with application of cinematography as well.

> In all my life that followed, up to the present night in this forest by the river of Varanda, I stayed straight and strictly abstinent...)

At the airport in Borispol, I didn't use an automatic cell to keep my bag and briefcase, both were left in the baggage room for them to have a shakedown of luggage and see there was no point in rubbing their scumbag provocateurs against my ass... A ticket to Odessa for a plane flying from Moscow cost 17 rubles. It did not exceed the amount of 20 rubles I had by me, stashed for covering survival needs until the first advance payment at construction sites of the new port city…

On arrival in the Odessa airport, I couldn't see it in the dark, and from there, on a city bus, I reached the intercity bus station where all the ticket offices were already locked, yet the baggage room still operated and in the waiting rooms there were benches for overnight sitting.

Of course, I felt myself the winner because I did manage, despite everything, to break thru Kiev. The gleeful delight with the success was assuring me of my exceptional invulnerability.

The return to actual state of things was not too pleasant when a rarefied line of passengers slogged in the early morning thru the station's back door for the first bus. In the incipient daylight, I sat in numb doze with my head thrown back over the bench backrest, leaving my whole throat, in the disdainfully victorious attitude, completely undefended. The pain from the needle stung to the right from my Adam's apple made me pinch the skin in the carotid artery area. Of course, there was no needle there but the feeling of a deeply stuck or, rather, hurriedly pulled out, needle persisted. The following half-hour I winced, rubbing, time and again, the skin covering my throat about that spot.

The ticket office opened and they informed me there were no runs to Yuzhny, and to get there I needed a local communication bus from Station 3 located by the New Bazaar.

Having reached there and examined the bus schedules fixed on the walls of Station 3 where the line "Yuzhny" repeated itself at different hours, I decided that I should take a walk before departure because—damn you, OMG!—it was but Odessa-Mommy!. I'm in Odessa! Yay!.

At the end of the small station-hall, there stood just a couple of sections of automatic storage cells. All their doors were locked except for one in the upper row of a section. I put my things inside, combined a code, dropped 15 kopecks into the slot, and slammed the door. The out-of-order lock did not click, that's why the cell stayed unused.

I took the documents out from my briefcase and put them in the inside pocket of my jacket. Then I quietly closed the door, so that it would look as if locked. On the crest of the hill-tall wave of euphoria, I left the bus station and entered Odessa…

~ ~ ~

Not everyone has chanced to experience the state of complete happiness in their life. I am from among those luckier ones. More than that, I can indicate the time and place of the absolute happiness experienced by me. These are the few hours of my first walk in Odessa…

The gleeful sunshine was filling the streets which I walked. I was a part to everything around and everything was a part of me in that unfamiliar city, where everyone tacitly recognized me because they had so long been waiting for my coming. I felt what was being thought by people and mentally responded to their thoughts... Here walked a woman rejoicing in her own beauty.

...wow!..that's a really good one!.

And she bloomed up victoriously.

...but I have Eera...

To which the woman saddened and, with her head lowered, passed by.

For a middle-aged Caucasian, gaping around with a ho-hum stare, I threw in the thought – "Eew, Javad, I still remember your dagger blow!" With all of his boredom shed off right away, the man woefully sagged his shoulders and pulled at the mustache, stunned by a sudden memory of a treacherous stub from Javad of whom up to the present moment he had not had the slightest idea.

...okay, let's not think sad things...

A swift flock of pioneers in scarlet neckties and white shirts shot past hurrying to the celebration of my arrival into the city.

On entering a big bookstore to make my choice for the future, I communicated with the shop-assistants and buyers there without ever opening my mouth.

I walked up the steps of the famous stair, bypassing the monument to Richelieu who never was a cardinal. In the nearby green grove there again were pioneers, but another ring and too much, to my mind, carried away with watching the freight cars slowly rolling into the port grounds.

"Pioneers!" shouted I to them. "Boats are nicer than cars!"

They looked around, waved and smiled, they recognized me.

The taxi driver took me to the “Bratislava” restaurant sharing on the way that it was a canteen on weekdays. But the current day was the holiday to celebrate my arrival, and he also knew that it was the so-eagerly-and-longly-awaited-for I...

I washed my hands and face with the water from a tap in the toilet, then I climbed to the upper floor to become the only guest in the huge dining room. The lone waitress appeared from somewhere and I ordered soup. When she left, I noticed a wrinkle in the tablecloth resulted from hasty ironing; I passed my palm over the crease and it disappeared.

...well, no wonder, after ironing those heaps of swaddles it's easy to smooth any crease out with just laying hands upon...

The waitress came and went leaving me alone in the whole wide hall. I began eating soup cooked by the recipes of the port city. On a low deck nearby there stood silent loudspeakers and amplifiers of the restaurant group.

...so, what to listen to?. something light... okay, let it be The Smokie... I flicked my fingers.

No sound.

...what?!. am I not omnipotent?!. or is the music here switched on some other way?.

And then, as if rammed by an unexpected blow, I got crushed by the feel of a gross mistake. Somewhere, there was a fatal flaw in my suppositions; I was terribly wrong somewhere. The soup became utterly stodgy, not eatable any more. The rice in it turned into fine shell-flakes that settled on the plate bottom, kinda layer of tiny splinters of mother-of-pearl.

...somewhere something was drastically amiss; I made a terrible mistake, miscalculated something...but what?!.

I started to pace between the tables, to and fro. The waitress approached, and I explained that I couldn't eat, I forgot something.

"What?"

"My jacket in the toilet," said I the first thing that came to my mind.

At that very moment, the door of the hall opened, and a neat pensioner announced that my jacket was in the cloakroom downstairs.

I went down to the cloakroom barrier where a woman with the juicy Odessa accent gave me my jacket, which the old man brought to her from the toilet.

"And the pockets had been filled to the utmost," she said with the bitter reproach clear to both of us. She meant that Sunny City who saw my arrival after such a long wait had bestowed the gifts which I stupidly lost by the mistake and still stayed in the dark as to what namely blunder it was. I despondently climbed upstairs to pay for the soup cooked of mother-of-pearl…

It's like in that game where you rise higher and higher along the winding path of figures and then fall in a precipitated nose-dive thru the pipe drawn to the very bottom line... I rolled out into the street from the restaurant “Bratislava”, where I had intentionally left my jacket in the toilet because there were documents and money in its pocket at the moment when I was admitted and entered the new shining world that needed neither money nor documents.

On the way to the bus station, I noticed a long slit in my pants. The seam had burst on the right thigh, starting from the pocket. And I went on covering it with my jacket whose pockets held no gifts from the new world spilled and scattered into nowhere because of my fault... The unlocked cell at the bus station was also empty of things I'd left there.

For the last ruble, I bought a ticket to Yuzhny and shoved it with the kopecks of change into the hip pocket. The bus was crammed with passengers jamming the aisle. My neighbor on the seat kept sighing and silently rubbed the damned un-outable spot in her skirt hem; I knew she had got spattered because of my lapse. And that my flaw caused the stuffed bus to stop at each and every traffic lights, all red with rage. Then the bus stood for a long time on a trenched street, giving way to an endless file of disgruntled pioneers covered with the dust from the heaps of earth on the pavement. It was I who spoiled the celebration...

By and by, the bus got outside the city, the passengers were leaving at the stops. I also got out at the last but one stop, because it was wrong to come to Yuzhny with a hole as big as the wound in the Spartacus's thigh pierced with a spear.

On the outskirts of the settlement, I respectfully greeted a boy of about twelve and asked for a needle and thread. He got it at once what I needed, and led me behind the high hedge of big stone blocks joined by thick seams of mortar, to a secluded place in the weed thicket. Then he ran away and returned with his friend who had a needle on a long black thread.

The boys got seated on the fence with their backs to me; I doffed my pants and started sewing up the burst seam. From the other side of the stone wall came the sounds of the tires screeching sharply, of the clashes and roar of lorry motors along the difficult roads, forth and back, in the endless universal battle... The boys sat there as mere on-lookers as if having no idea that behind their backs a member of RMC was a-darning a wound in his thigh.

With gratitude, I returned them the needle and the still long enough stretch of the thread... When alone, I got seated under an Apple-tree, took out a Belomor cigarette, lit it and stuck the match into the earth driving it full-length in to put out the flame. Ouch! How she cried!. I startled at the wild heartrending holler of that black-and-white cow at the nearby tree, who desperately bellowed with her muzzle turned up to the heaven. How could I know that everything was so intricately entangled and mingled with each other!.

Then I walked thru a dense Willow thicket, and in the sky above there hung a huge bird, like a stork, almost motionless, with an escort of smaller birds stuck to the air around him…

...so, that's it – the highest Head... Devil, or God or What else you could be is more than I possibly can comprehend... the messy mingle-mangle of a whipped up world is entangled too confusedly... and here I am with nothing but the documents, a pocket notebook, a pen and the handkerchief with a small sailing boat... let's sign the contract then as becomes your trade, eh?.

I took out the pen and the bus ticket. I did not know how to draw such a document, so I simply put my signature below the lines of figures knocked out by the cash register at the bus station. I

put the pen back in my pocket and placed the ticket upon the long leaves in a pliant Willow fork. Then I turned my back to the contract – it's a fair play, no peeping.

A sharp gust of breeze swirled the bushes, but when I turned around the ticket was still in the same fork, only turned over with its blank side up... so that's your signature?. smart move, no one will ever be able to forge...

I went out of the Willow thicket to a tall brick building, like the central warehouse at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, and started to ask where the personnel department was. They told me that everything had got closed already, but after the second shift, the bus was going to the city for which I had to wait.

I waited for a long time, then there was a long ride thru the night by a small PAZ bus. The fellow-travelers were leaving the bus, in twos and threes, on dimly lit streets in the city, until the driver told me I had to get off too, on the corner of a large empty square.

Getting off the empty bus, I saw the yellowish gleam of lamp lights in a narrow street nearby and went along its fences, then turned to the left and at the next crossing I chose the left turn once again. Dry snaps of claws against the asphalt behind my back were following me; judging by the sound, it was some hugely big beast of a dog, yet I was not afraid at all, and I did not look back, and just kept walking on slowly.

Ahead, the same square opened and I stopped about 20 meters from it because it was dead sure that I reached my sentry point. The lamp on a pillar poured down yellow light, but I stood outside the circle drawn by its cone on the asphalt so that it could not reach my feet.

From the black silhouette of the five-story block on the left, a cat trotted stealthily across the road to the yard of a dark *khutta* and was met there with a joyous jingling of dog's chain, the date of antipodes. Even slaves have it off at times...

The night went on and I stood motionless, pretending that I had nothing to do with that crushing din and ramble beyond the horizon, where the cogwheels of the universe clockwork with frenzied screech were coming to a clash halt because of my fatal mistake at who knows what…

When the dump truck pulled up behind me, I turned but did not give way, and only threw up my right hand, because that was my post. Those sitting in the cabin had no heads, impenetrable pitch-black darkness cut them off to the shoulders dimly visible in the feeble beam of the lamplight from the pillar.

The driver, who came down from the cab, had a head though; he led me, with care, aside. I did not resist. The dump truck left, taking away the one on the passenger seat, with the viper asp blackness upon his shoulders.

Black traces of tires stayed on the road. They should not be left there – the darkness would follow reading the black marks. I began effacing the traces with the soles of my shoes. Would they last long?

The wind was rising, a spread open newspaper sheet raced frisking from the square to rub against my shank. I made out the headline "The Prince's Tomb"; it took it a really long time to find me. The paper rustled its goodbye and slipped farther on along the asphalt...

The sky became gray... The dog-tired, yet satisfied, cat cautiously retracted her way across the road to the five-story block to pick up her upper-society day life at the lordly loft estate. Woeful laments of suppressed despair and supplicating clank of chain sounded after her.

The new day dawned, but I stood there until a woman in white crossed the square in the distance heading to the left edge of it, unseen from my post. An old woman in black appeared in her wake, pushing a carriage. But I knew there was no baby at all. It was eggs she was pushing along, white and round like billiards balls; dense grapes of eggs.

And I realized that I might leave my post and go on to the square… I walked along empty streets until I turned into the door of a factory check-entrance.

In a narrow room, I asked for water from an old man in black *spetzovka*, wearing glasses and a workman cap. He gave me a glass of water and we both watched closely if I would swallow the black speck floating on the water surface.

I drank all of it. The speck remained stuck to the glass wall. The man in black told me how to find the nearest employment office…

~ ~ ~

The office was locked, but then a woman with the key came and opened it. I said her that I was looking for a job, and she told me to wait for one more office employee, who should presently come.

Not far from the office there was an open diary café. The kopecks I still had were enough to buy a large bottle of milk, but I drank only half of it. Over a tall tumbler of thin glass, I uttered the parting words of Romeo, "Here's to my love!" And then I drank it...

When I returned to the employment office, the second employee was already in place. I knew at once that she was Death, and the one who came first was Love.

Death looked thru my documents and surly announced that I had been divorced already, but Love smiled and said that, well, so what? Then she went out to the other room to make a phone call and I stayed with Death, obviously irritated, who looked a little like Olga. Maybe, because of her dyed hair, only longer.

On her return, Love said that there was a job for me at the Odessa Mining Management, I had to go to Pole Explorers Square and find the chief engineer there, and also remind him about a car she was waiting for but forgot to mention while on the phone. A car for Maria, okay? He should know...

The chief engineer said there was no position for me at the management and only the job of a roof-fastener at a mine which was incompatible with my higher education.

I hurriedly assured him that my education would not be in the way at all, and he commanded me to get into the bed of a truck standing by the porch of the management, which tootled off and soon was out of the city. Apart from me, there was a tall and white, yet shabby, refrigerator in the truck-bed, and a pair of black chains, like from a chainsaw only much longer. They looked like a couple of mating snakes who, with the jostling of the truck-bed over the bumpy road, kept sneaking up along its floorboards, gradually closing in on me.

In the village of Vapnyarka, the truck entered the grounds of somewhat manufacture. The engineer told me to drop the chains from the back and I hurled the damned stalkers into a deep puddle, although there was a dry place too.

"Got crazy?" shouted the chief engineer, but I saw that he liked my exploit.

The truck driver dragged the drowned serpents into the open door of the warehouse... Then we drove to another place in the village and schlepped the refrigerator into a summer cottage in the group of the like cabins, surrounded by a common meter-tall palisade. The chief engineer stuck the cord into a socket for a check, and the fridge hummed in satisfaction.

"I've nearly forgotten," said I, "Maria wanted you to send her some car."

In fact, I remembered those signal words all the time and only waited for the proper moment...

The chief engineer explained how to get to a water tap in the street. I went there, took off my jacket, washed my hands and arms up to the short sleeves, and also my face and neck. Two militiamen with officer stars in their shoulder-straps stood on one side from me, and two army officers in their fatigue uniform on the other. They all waited patiently while I was splashing because I was with the chief, and after that water, no needle would ever be able to pierce the skin in my neck. Then I walked away wiping myself with the tiny handkerchief that at once soaked thru.

The truck left the village and rode on along the highway and very soon the road dived into a steep tilt to the right of which there unfurled a vast limitless field. I could not understand what it was until a moment later it woke up and stirred in movement, and long low waves with white crests ran to the shore. So that’s the sea!.

I took out the pocket notebook and, consulting the watch on my wrist, made the entry on the inside of its back cover:

"July 20, 1979

13: 30: 15

Eera

Sehrguey

Liliana"

The highway went up again. At the top of the ascent, the truck turned left onto a country road, and thru the outskirts of a village went to the field where the road ran along a windbreak belt. Two kilometers farther, after a long gentle slant there appeared and were passed two or three barrack-like structures and, after another hundred meters, the road ended in a wide pit rigged with a narrow-gauge track running past the office-cottage labeled "Mine Dophinovka" into the dark hole of a cave-tunnel in the opposite wall…

Three worn-out armchairs with wooden armrests stood in the shaded room. In the one with its back to the window curtains sat the mustached mine foreman, about 45, of a placid countenance, with the hair thinning away on his pate.

From the chair opposite him, the chief engineer with jovial laughter recounted my flinging the chain-snakes into the water. The foreman did not partake in his mirth, and the chief engineer subsided guiltily. His guarded respect to the foreman made it clear who was in charge there.

Seated to the right from the foreman, I handed, at his request, my passport over, a little ashamed that it was so sullied.

He opened it and, without touching, passed his right palm over the pages.

And I beheld how the paper in them brightened getting filled with life as if it had just come from the printing house, and there even appeared some ectoplastic transparent glow from its innards. Both the chief engineer and I watched fascinated, doing miracles was outside our limits. Seemed, like, I, after all, managed to reach the most supreme…

He had long since left the clouds and acquired the form of a foreman at a shabby mine. His name? It shall not be taken in vain. Bypassing the ineffable name, I can only disclose that he had fancied the patronymic of "Yakovlevich"…

Then I said that all my things were lost at a bus station in Odessa, and there was no money by me, but I had to call my wife because she would be worried. The chief engineer at once outstretched a dark-blue five-ruble note to me and announced that I would live in the hostel above the pit.

I needed no explanation that the hostel, as well as the mine itself, were a deceptive illusion for gullible dupes in the world where one should constantly be on their look-out. So I pinched the tiny brownish mote off the bill and gently placed this fuzz-mark on the wooden scarred armrest getting rid of it…

~ ~ ~

Besides doing my jobs – at first, a mine roof-fastener, and later on an assistant of the stone-cutting machine operator, not to mention some short-term labors, I constantly was in the state of ceaseless alerted search for an answer: what's hidden behind the seeming facade all around? My quest for clarity continued also in Odessa, where I often went for making long-distance telephone calls to Nezhyn from the intercity telephone station on Pushkin Street. Where was the money from? I borrowed it in the hostel from Slavic Aksyanov, or his wife Lyouda.

In the, let's assume, hostel, seemingly, adapted from a, supposedly, cow-farm-house there were four rooms on both sides of a long corridor from end to end of the barrack-like building. In one of the rooms lived the young childless family of Aksyanovs. Their neighbors were a Bessarabian family with a one-year-old baby. An elderly single electrician occupied the room next to them.

I was given a room across the corridor from which, reportedly, they moved the radio set away but left the grates in the window. First of all, I pulled the iron frame with bars out and put it outside in the tall grass reaching the window ledge. Then I whitewashed the walls, and for one entire evening was thrashing them with a tube of a rolled-up newspaper in the battle with a myriad of vampire mosquitoes. The following morning Slavic Aksyanov, looking fairly battered, asked what I was doing there all the evening after repair.

"Safari," curtly said I without going into detail for he obviously got his share in the battle.

The rest of the doors in the corridor were locked, except for the first to the right from the entrance where there was a shower.

The mine workers were brought in the morning by a truck from Vapnyarka and New Dophinovka villages. They arrived whistling and screaming in the truck-bed like devils, but they called themselves Makhno bandits. Every 2 days, a pair of them were filling the large tank of the shower with water from a small hut in a hollow, some 30 meters from the hostel. There was a deep well with a bucket tied with a chain to the iron windlass. Electric heaters heated the water in the tank long before the end of the working shift.

Aside from the barrack-hostel, on the slope overgrown with tall grass, stood a tin-walled outhouse. There was no door in it, and the facility had to be approached with some kind of a warning tootle, so as not to catch a user in the posture of an eagle on the roost... From the doorless toilet there opened a magnificent view of the long sea inlet and its sheer opposite shore.

> (...there is a concept of "stream of consciousness" which presumes that a person is capable of making mental comments on anything happening around them, or to think about something extraneous, having nothing, at first glance, to do with those happenings. Following the widely entertained assumption, "the stream of consciousness" was invented by an Irishman named James Joyce, although he tried to bring into play a certain French author from whom he, allegedly, picked up the idea. However, much earlier that same stream, even though not on an overly prominent scale, occurred in the meditations of the failed-to-become mother-in-law of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky.

Thus, "the stream of consciousness" seems to be one of those discoveries which have to take place repeatedly and in different places, just in case, to ensure they would not be missed. The "stream", when boiled down, announces to the human race that a person is really able to exchange thoughts with themselves.

What happened to me in Odessa in that crazy summer of '79 which turned out to be the most beautiful summer in my life, could hardly be called a "stream of conscience". A stream? I pray, desist! No! It was a waterfall and a refreshing one too, tuning up my tensely strained senses on their constantly alerted lookout...

I exchanged thoughts not just with myself but also with any-every-one-thing I came across. Starting from a small pebble stuck in the dust of roadside up to the night stars with their dew-like glint in the sky.

"Seen that?"

And the stars would answer with high-and-mighty indifference, "And more than that, and more than once..." And they went blinking on the way they did the millions upon millions of years before our era.

And it did not bother me at all, that tireless, constant, wide-spray fire-pump, gush of thoughts. After all, the human brain is engaged for some scanty 10 percent of its natural full capacity. So, let it have a knock-up, sweep away the cobweb and dust motes accumulated in the remaining percent!

Of course, during working hours the intensity of my single-handed brainstorm somewhat decreased – the workplace environment seemed more static and settled when compared to split-second changes of circumstances on the city streets. However, I can proudly state that even as deep as 38 meters under the earth surface, the intensity of my mental labor was much higher than the obnoxious ten-percent standard...)

The mine "Dophinovka" produced *cubics* – three-dimensional freestone blocks of 20 cm x 20 cm x 40 cm cut out from the underground limestone strata. For which purpose, there was a drift tunnel dipping from the wide pit and going under 38 meters of other stratification layers. Down the tunnel, here and there, the shafts were branching out on one or another of its sides—also tunnels, but lower and narrower—just like boughs from a tree trunk. At the end of those shaft-galleries, there were placed the stone-cutting machines which cut *cubics* from the wall in front of their noses. Such was the general, birds-eye-view, picture…

As for the details, my instructor in the roof-fastener job bore a sonorous name of ancient Russ princes – Rostislav. However, he never responded to this name because even to him it sounded strange and foreign, since everyone knew and addressed him as Charlic.

First of all, he led me to the shaft of Machine 3 because of his humble trepidation before its operator, whom Charlic titled exclusively with his patronymic "Kapitonovich". Being just a petty

demon, Charlic at every turn made up to Kapitonovich, a stout devil of esteem, who had once served a stretch of ten years.

Both Charlic and I walked holding a flashlight in hand. Going down to the mine, everyone received his flashlight from Lyouda Aksyanova, the lamp-rechargeress, in her cave by the entrance to the main tunnel. Without the light, down there you got into the wholesome pitch-black darkness and could easily stumble over a rail of the narrow-gauge track, or against one of the rarely put ties under it, and have a nasty fall. That's why everyone in the mine wore a plastic helmet and each morning, before going down, they scribbled their signatures in a ledger to testify that they got instructed on safety rules and now knew their risks and were up to them.

The temperature in the mine was always above zero, even in winter. A constant calm and pressing, underwater silence reigned in the shafts if no one talked to someone else and no mechanism was working nearby... We walked and walked along a narrow low gallery, one wall of which bore serifs from a stone-cutting saw and the other was screened off by a hedge of *cubic* debris. A loose pair of thick electric wires in white isolation ran along atop the hedge which was rather tall but did not reach the gallery ceiling. In mining, the ceiling is called roof, but more on that later...

At last, far ahead appeared dim yellow light of a pair of bulbs thru their scaly incrustation of thick dust. The stone-cutting machine stood facing the end wall, and Kapitonovich sat in its open seat waiting for us. He worked without an assistant because his dream was to one day get paid 300 rubles a month.

The stone in the end wall before the machine — 2,5 m x 4,5 m — was already crisscrossed with deep furrows of "the sketch" whose parallel cuts ran horizontally between sidewalls and were intersected by vertical ones cut that same way from the ceiling to the floor. The grid formed the butt ends of the future *cubics*. Now, you just needed to drive a breaker in one of the slots in the middle of the "sketch" and break a *cubic* out. Then a couple of *cubics* next to it, until there formed a niche roomy enough to allow for breaking the rest of them off with a sledgehammer.

Kapitonovich was waiting for us because in the past 2 days his stone-cutting machine moved forward, away from the end of the narrow-gauge track. Charlic and I extend the railroad with two pairs of three-meter rails, delivered the day before, and now the mine cars, aka wagonettes, could be pushed closer to the end wall to stack the broken out *cubics* upon them... If an empty wagonette capsized off the rails, the situation was called "a bored-in wagonette" and 2 or 3 workers heaved it back in the track, the method being named "fart-steamer". Then a tiny mining locomotive would come down from the open pit, and pull back the wagonettes loaded with the cubics, collecting on its way up the loaded wagonettes waiting in the entrances to other cutting-machines' shafts.

Not all of the *cubics* were breaking evenly off the wall, so before the next "sketching" the most sticking out pieces of the limestone had to be knocked off with that same sledgehammer. Those fragments together with the spoilage—*cubics* broken off too short, or split because of the stratum faults in the stone—served the material to continue laying of the hedge-screen along the shaft wall. Without that masonry, there would be no room to shove the sand off.

Where did the sand come from? When the cutting-machine, with growling din and clang of its chain, was cutting a furrow in the wall, a long jet of sand, or rather sawdust gushed out into the shaft. The shield of metal-slatted glass protected the operator from the whipping sand, although not from the clouds of dust. The sand pile rose like a dune around the cutting-machine, and if not shoved off with a shovel into the "pocket", between the hedge and the wall, there would be no room for the narrow-gauge track...

With the track-promotion accomplished, Charlic took the helmet off his head, put it down and sat upon as on a potty – that's much more comfortable than sitting on the floor, or on a heap of sand or rubble. He lit a Prima begged from Kapitonovich and reverently inquired about the meaning of the large blood-red stains in the right wall of the gallery cut through the hard mass of stone.

Kapitonovich with portent gravity forwarded his explanation that once there was the sea around here with a steamboat on fire, which, eventually, sank, leaving the red of the flames in the stone. Charlic gave out a servile giggle, while I was trying to suppress the unnecessary contemplation that ten years was the standard stretch provided for murder because I liked Kapitonovich.

Before leaving for other cutting-machines, we fixed the roof in the shaft. For that purpose, Kapitonovich started the machine and cut a series of short horizontal slots under the very ceiling of the gallery. When the stone plates between the slots were crushed away with the breaker, a mortice of 20 cm x 20 cm and 40 cm deep was formed up there. The same operation was done on the opposite wall.

Then Charlic and I fetched an 18-cm-thick log, of those named *ploshchuk* in the mine lingo, and thrust its end into one of the niches, as deep as it could go. The other end we raised to the opposite niche and shoved inside, not too deep though, so as not to pull the log out from the first one. We propped it up by the sidewalls with a pair of shorter *stoyak* logs. Now the shaft roof was fixed.

Where did the 3 logs come from? Very simple, retreating our way about some 30 meters back into the darkness of the shaft, we pulled out one of the previous fastenings. Where else could they be from?. In the period of my work at the "Dophinovka" mine, there were shipped exactly 3 new logs there. I personally bared them of bark with the "stroog" tool (kinda ax welded crosswise to a breaker's end) before Slavic Aksyanov took them into the drift tunnel on a wagonette...

So, the roof in the shafts was secured with the economically saved materials… Sometimes the roof started to "drip" or "get rainy". Then it began crackling, splitting and dropping down pieces of rock; something in a way of collapse though not total.

Charlic got under such "raining" in front of my eyes when pulling out one more of "economically saved" logs. He was lucky though to be lying on the sand heap between the hedge and the wall, close to the ceiling. The dropping cob of stone, that separated from the roof, did not have room enough to gain speed and just lay on his chest, gently. Not a too big flake though, half-meter by half-meter and about ten centimeters thick.

He immediately recollected Alik the Armenian. When the roof started to rain, Alik had to retreat for 16 meters, backward. Racing, of course, as quick as he could because there was not even time to turn around with the roof crackling and falling and catching up. And so he ran, backward, yelling on the way, "Fuck the mine! Fuck the money!" But how? That was the question... So the roof in mining is not the same as an ordinary roof…

Besides the operating shafts, there also were abandoned ones in the mine. The layer of proper stone dwindled out there, and they were left off. Entrances to such shafts were sealed with a wall of *cubic* rubble joined by mortar, so that prevent drafts.

However, not all of the left off shafts were sealed. One time the foreman showed me the emergency exit from the mine. Thru one such unsealed shaft, we reached the old trunk tunnel where once the wagonettes were pulled by horses. That drift also led to the same open pit, only on a higher level than the present one. And that old tunnel also had its shafts. When Charlic was on his vacation and I remained the only roof-fastener in the mine, I was pulling the logs from there.

On one occasion, I returned to the newer part of the mine, to Machine 4 shaft, so pleased and proud of myself that I was hauling a whole log alone. With some stupid jest too, like, "Here's for Machine 4 by special order, all the way from Rio de Janeiro!" Then I dropped the log off my shoulder and the bastardy piece of wood—crackle!—fell apart into two, because of being way too ancient material.

But those gossips, as if I was roaming the abandoned shafts without a flashlight, were blatant lies. They started because when someone else's flashlight was on, I turned mine off. I did not even know why. To save energy? It made no difference because after the shift all of the flashlights were delivered to Lyouda for recharging.

A meter-long length of wire connected the flashlight to the accumulator in the small tarp shoulder bag. The flashlight with the clumsy 16 dubbed on its accumulator side was mine.

In the abandoned galleries, I always turned the flashlight on, and one time its beam caught a flash of some unseen, unearthly beauty.

I couldn't make it out from afar what were those brilliant sparks in the tremendous overpowering silence that the dark gallery was filled with. It's hard to describe – some spiky pure-white alien structure or, maybe, like some creature from the ocean depths where even bathyscaphes could not reach, and there it was shimmering with tiny diamonds in the circle of light. Awesomely beautiful.

And I had an ax in my hand for checking if the logs out there were still usable. So the ax swooshed thru the darkness above the light and the white thing fell to the floor. And now instead of the inexplicable beauty, I saw just a huge slimy spittle, only then I guessed that it was a garland of mold. Later I was coming across the like garlands, but smaller in size and only brown, as if being punished for the murder of that pure beauty…

Then Charlic returned from his vacation and a new worker, Vasya, was given the job of a roof-fastener, and I became an assistant of the stone-cutting machine operator. Well, it's not as romantic as walking the no man's shafts and it's deafening, and the nose and mouth must be covered with a cloth because of the dust, but—wow!—familiar all faces! Messrs. Breaker, Shovel, and Sledgehammer…

~ ~ ~

But all the aforesaid was so only at the first, uninitiated, glance. What actually produced the "Dophinovka" mine under the unadvertised supervision of the most supreme chief, that is, Yakovlevich? Well, it depends. *Jedem das Seine*.

The mining engineer Pugachov, who showed his pyramidally straight nose down there once a month, was interested in gold only or, rather, in the gold sand. He would suck at the gold fix on a fang in his mouth, and quietly ask the stone-cutting machine operator, "Enough sand today, eh?"

After I had (unintentionally) heard him say that I started to dust out my *spetzovka* pockets at the end of each shift. Like, you're not gonna buy me with your vile metal! Moreover, I did not know the way of turning that sand into gold... Tolik, the operator of Machine 2, got stunned when he saw what I was getting rid of.

But they, no doubt, knew how to turn it into gold indeed and then, under the guise of aluminum castings, stacked it in the tall grass nearby the hostel. Those looked exactly like ingots of bank gold reserves, only of aluminum color, of course, so as to camouflage.

The foreman himself told me that and almost straightly too, "Such a worth and no one has brains to collect them, so they kick back here, littered." And where a mine for *cubic* production would get aluminum ingots from? Or for what purpose?.

As for the *cubics* themselves, they were, naturally, souls. Machine 5, for example, whose operator was Hitler, or else Adolf (well, anyway, everyone called him so: either Adolf or Hitler) was producing human souls.

Ivan, from Machine 1, felt hurt indeed that, when his wagonettes were pulled to the pit up there, lots of his *cubics* were rejected while anything from Adolf—however uneven and defected—went thru. But, if you think about it, so it is – many human a soul happen with flaws. And what is paradoxical, his namesake—Hitler—annihilated so many souls, and this one, down here, turns them out slapdash and keep taunting Ivan.

Whose souls were sawed out by other machines, I could only guess. For archangels? Demons? Titans?. That's what really depressed me most – my ignorance. Yes, I felt, of course, that I was a chosen one, but I remained a so sorely ignorant chosen, like, a pawn in the game whose rules all are aware of but you.

Advancement to getting it went in trial and error method, checking each hunch I had on the way. Sometimes there happened real insights as it was when after the shift I went to the New

Dophinovka village to buy food for the next couple of days. Among the workers in the truck-bed, there was some old woman in a headscarf. The truck was purring past the hostel where the Bessarabian stood in the doorway with the baby in her arms. "Such a nice baby-girl!" pronouncing these words, the old lady released her headscarf and tied it up again, but somehow differently...

I returned home walking thru the fields alongside the trees in the windbreak belt. But I could not get rest in my room – the one-year-old girl of the Bessarabian family was choking with shrieks and cries, and her mother, not knowing how to ease the baby, kept carrying it along the corridor —from end to end—swaying in her arms, chanting "ah-ah!", but nothing helped. I never could bear children crying, but the hostel was not a local train where you might move to another car.

And suddenly I remembered how the woman in the truck-bed had tied her headscarf differently while praising this, so calm at that time, child. Going out into the corridor and silently, but steadily, looking at the baby's mother, I took out my handkerchief from the pocket, stretched it open and folded back again, yet on the other side, after which I went out to the well-hut to fetch some water.

When I returned the woman gave me a happy grateful look; the girl in her arms was perfectly calm, a kerchief had appeared on her head tied in a knot on the forehead. Bingo!.

However, there happened misfires too. The rooster, swaggering around the hostel entrance, did not understand my fair intentions and contemptuously turned away, when I offered him a grain of laundry blue from the pinch scattered over the wide bench next to the entrance. The proposed supplement to the ration of the bird was based on good motives and freshly gained experience. That day it was revealed to me, that the combination of blue and black symbolize strength: the cock with his black plumage would turn a super-cock had he picked up that laundry blue speck…

And the fact that I was both chosen and protected one became obvious when a certain glassy-eyed was sneaking to me with obviously inimical intentions…

There are three distinct varieties of glassy-eyed. Those in whom eye glassiness is combined with pronounced purity of whites in their eyes are harmless. They, beyond doubt, are possessed, but remain just tools for the transmission of information, like, what's up and on and how it goes? – kind of a spyglass, and nothing more. Where does the information flow to? Who's the recipient? The former dwellers of Olympus in their current forms, of course.

The second variety, with blurry luster filming their eyeballs, are self-employed freelancers looking for a chance refreshment with "red-and-hot", or striving to somehow otherwise get recharged on your account.

"There's an underground passage for people, but we may use it as well," one such one told me, apparently taking for one of her likes when, in an unfamiliar and poorly lit area of night Odessa, I asked her how to get to the bus station – their favorite feeding trough. Those it was, waiting for me to get out of the "Bratislava" restaurant with my torn thigh, and they impatiently urged the usher-woman to cut the needless chit-chat (which was not that but a talk loaded with meaning

understood by both of us even though not to the same degree of clarity) and set “the rabbit” (me) out for their hunt…

For the pre-employment medical check (two weeks after getting the job), I visited a corresponding unit facilities in the Vapnyarka village to pass the blood sample analysis. On entering the office, I saw, besides the nurse, a lady marked with that particular eye murkiness, who sat on the couch and, from a corner of her mouth, there was hanging a long flexible tube. The nurse explained that the tube was just a probe, and the lady would not be in the way. As if I could not figure out from her looks what kind of lady it was and why she was there...

Then the nurse customarily pierced the pad of my finger and squeezed it and, instead of the usual bead of blood, it gave out a tiny jet of it, no thicker than a needle, like milk sprinkling from the squeezed nipple of a breastfeeding woman. I had never seen such a thing in my life!

And not only I was surprised – the lady's jaw dropped and that, let's say, probe wanted to pop out too. Just like an alky who had outstretched a cup for a fill but they splashed a whole three-liter jar of hooch over it. What a loss of precious stuff!.

As for reaching to the blood with their fangs, that's just a grandma's fair-tale for sillies. To fill their tanks they use some subtle, inconspicuous and, even though not fully understood by me, yet quite efficient, technology…

The glassy-eyed of the blurry type, who attempted at utilizing me, was a Volga driver that brought his boss to the hostel. In the corridor, there also was a rarely opened office of the mining engineer, visited by those coming to arrange the transaction of taking *cubics* from the pit.

That day, as always, I came from the mine to hostel for the midday meal and was washing my hands at the washstand on stake, not far from the entrance.

The glassy-eyed did not know me because of being an outsider, and he kept sneakily closing in, holding in his hands the weapon – an artifact that looked like a length of aluminum wire twisted in a special way, about 20 centimeters long.

Noting that blurry glassiness in his filmed eyes and the cautious way of his slinking nearer, I realized that I was done. The distance shortened, yet the moment when he already could reach me with his thing, a gray kitten jumped out from the tall grass and rubbed his scruff against my black *spetzovka* pants. And at once the glassy-eyed stalker lost any interest in me, lowered his weapon and returned to the car. The unknown rescuer-kitten who I never—before or later—saw around, disappeared into the grass…

But more often I had to rely only on my own prudent circumspection. As on that narrow beach under the cliff of Chabanka.

I wanted to take a swim in the sea and had already entered the peaceful slow waves but stopped – two fishermen in swimming trunks with fishing rods in their hands stood ahead. Between them, there was enough space to swim forwards, but I realized that the rods were the barrier blocking

the way to the sea. And only seizing the moment when they simultaneously pulled their fishing rods up, I plunged in and swam away from the beach.

I swam for a long time, sometimes laying on the water for rest and wondering why my father told me that seawater supports a swimmer because of the salt dissolved in it. It made no difference to lying on the freshwater... Then I swam on, mostly on my back, facing the warm bright sky, until I felt a dab at my shoulder.

I looked back and saw a jellyfish in the water, semi-transparent and as wide as a basin. I gave it way and went on ahead, but then I began to come across more and more jelly-fish – you bypassed one of them to just run into another. Popping up a bit out from the water, I looked forward and saw a whole shoal of them which had turned the calm sun-driven waves into some jellyfish soup crowded with their translucent bodies. I didn't get the nerve to breast that soup, I turned around and swam back to the already distant shore…

The shingle beach of Chabanka had some sandy stretches in it. On one of those spits, near the water's edge, I wanted to write "Eera" but the waves did not allow. They ran up and leveled the wet sand before I had time to write out all the letters, and I only scratched my finger to bleeding with the tiny shell fragments mixed with the sand, before I gave up…

But my first meeting with the sea was on the beach of New Dophinovka where I went after work, along the shore of the sea inlet that reached the hostel. The water in it was shallow and very transparent. I walked until saw some worn-out tires in the water, dropped there from the shore by some morons. So I took off my pants, went into the shallow water, and dragged the tires onshore, but after one more bend of the inlet, I saw there was an entire trash dump in it – life would not be enough to drag all that debris out, and it was evening already. Then there started a thicket of reeds stretching to the highway and along its opposite roadside there unfolded the wide vista of the sea and sea alone...

But if going to New Dophinovka by the country road, there sometimes were huge ships hovering in the sky. The ships, of course, stood in the sea which merged with the sky at the horizon, that's why you saw a field with a ship above it and, still higher or next to its bow, the immense red ball of the setting sun. Those ships were so large that they, probably, do not fit in the harbor and had to stay right there in the sea-sky…

~ ~ ~

With Slavic Aksyanov, at first, I had normal relations, even though I saw that in his past life he served as a Nazi officer in a death camp while at present he was too keen on producing baloney sensations by hoopla talks. And I even helped him to saw boards for the family couch...

The distance from Chabanka to the mine was about two kilometers, approximately same as from New Dophinovka, but with no windbreak belt alongside the country road. And in the open fields, some arrogant flies always started to follow me, a whole swarm of them keeping buzzing around and never lagging behind. But I did not want to bring a "tail of a follower" after me and give out the location of the mine, so I found a nice way of putting them off the track.

Nearby the hostel there stood a long structure of a former cattle farm, which I began to use as the disinfection lock in a spaceship visiting unexplored planets. I entered the building from one end, with all the buzzing flies swarming around me, and marched to the exit at the other end. The whiff of the manure from once upon a time allured them; confusedly, they rushed in all directions in active search for fresher dung, while I walked out into the air, with the food bought in Chabanka and without a single buzzing follower behind my back...

Now, Slavic asked the foreman for permission to use some floorboards from the old farm and make a couch for himself and his wife because he was expecting the arrival of his mother-in-law. Then we went and pulled out the boards for the project; a rather decent material they were, only nailed way too deep, but there was a breaker by us.

With the material procured, we started to discuss the measurements of the planned furniture item. By that time, I had already had a certain, fully developed, numerological system in which the meaning of some individual figures was brought to a complete clarity, thus, for instance, 22 corresponded to "death", 24 to "wife", 10 to "sex", and so on, and all that remained there was just to combine their meaning the way called for by the situation. Minding the purpose of the product, I offered him the best solution for its length – 2 meters and 10 centimeters. Which read that 10 for 2 is the very thing for a young family. But he balked!

"I wanna have 2 meters and 30!"

Okay, you know better what you want… He schlepped a "goat"-trestle from somewhere, the kind used for sawing firewood, and we started. A board on the "goat", two marks with the tape measure and – off we go!

When we stopped to catch a breath, his wife, Lyouda, was passing by to the hostel entrance. Pointing at the "goat", she with unhidden disgust announced to Slavic, "Don't you hope, that I ever lie upon this thing!" Full of indignation, she went away and I got finally convinced that she was not a native to this world. What normal woman has never seen a "goat"?

Apart from that, she could read thoughts... I once entered their room, where Slavic was eating soup and watching television. I said I was not hungry, and sat by the door to wait for him to finish off his *havvage*. And in the corner behind his back there stood a refrigerator, with a stand-up mirror put atop of it face down. The mirror frame had a pair of plastic legs to keep it upright, when not in the supine position.

From the chair by the door which I was seated on, the puzzle collected into a coherent picture: Slavic, eating the TV with his stare, ladles the soup into himself, the two green legs sticking out of his hair in the form of curved horns, kinda lyre only without strings, of course. Then I thought to myself, that is, inside my mind, "So, you're not only a Nazi but a cuckold too!"

Lyouda read that thought, and went directly to the refrigerator, she turned the legs down and gave me an eloquent look. Like, we need none of your comments on the skeletons in our family cupboard!.

Well, in general, when Slavic fired up the shakedown flights on that aerodrome of a couch in their room, there cropped up some inconsistencies in the game. Three days later, he dragged it out of the hostel in the tall grass and shortened with a hacksaw. That’s what the trial and error method is about…

"What's he bungling at?" asked a Makhno bandit another when they were passing by.

"As if it's not clear. A machine-tool for fucking, what else?"

"A-aha!"

Well, what else is there to expect from mujiks? They just can't bring it over in a subtler way, blurt out as is, without numerological refinement...

And when his mother-in-law arrived, he started to have fits of frenzy. He visited my room and made faces. The purpose of that fleering was clear to me without any explanations – he wanted to drive me mad...

Once Ivan, the driver of Machine 1, called me to share a midday meal with him and his assistant in their shaft. His wife worked in the canteen of some military school in Odessa, where they also trained Negroes from the countries of awakened Africa. So those Afro-Africans were not too hungry after their sleep, judging by the amount of provision she brought home from there. When Ivan removed the lid from that aluminum pot, it was brimming with meat on ribs, without any garnish though. The 3 of us—Ivan, his assistant and I—hardly managed to finish off that hecatomb, leaving a pile of bared bones on the sand by the 5-liter pot. And then Slavic came up to borrow some spare part for his stone-cutting machine; on seeing that cannibal still-life, he distorted his mug in earnest, bitten by the recollection of everyday oats from his mother-in-law, most likely.

Maybe, that’s why several hours later, when the hostel residents were enjoying the coolness of late evening, he wanted to fight me. He even snatched one ingot from the gold stock in the tall grass, raised it with both hands over his head and hurled at me. The action resulted in a really beautiful sight – the full moon pouring its tender light onto the scintillating tracery of dashes in the arc-shaped trajectory chosen by the lobbed ingot for its flight, gleaming lazily with white, apparently aluminum, color against the velvety darkness of balmy night. (Or was I wrong, and the mine was mining platinum, after all?)

Now it was my turn to ran backward in the manner of Alik the Armenian. Slavic's wife, Lyouda, took him home from the arena of demonstration performances...

During my next visit to Odessa, I dropped to a legal consultation. I did not plan it at all, just their office sign caught my eye. Without leaking any names or geographical locations, I asked for a recommendation if pestered by a neighbor in the hostel.

"Turn to the Komsomol Committee of your enterprise."

Well, and those also were not of this world. They are already anywhere, see?!.

But if Supreme Head was Yakovlevich, then who, the heck, could the chief engineer be? It's not difficult to guess – who's Creator's antipode? Prince of Darkness and master of the impure, in all his glory.

That could be easily deducted even from their attitude toward each other – respectful, but armed, neutrality. I recollect them standing in the trunk tunnel and talking eye to eye – correctness itself! The foreman in his black *spetzovka* and the chief engineer in a summer shirt with a white handkerchief bent over its collar to keep the dust off. If there were a safari helmet on his head instead of the regular plastic one, it would be a ready picture "I'm the master here!" Although, of course, the depths under the ground are his domain.

> (...you might protest here: how could be possible a contact between such antagonistic opposites? Do not forget – it was the twentieth century around, in its second half, when everything got so intertwined, confused and tangled that a simplistic Geometry could no longer help out...)

I assumed the stance of a foreman's sympathizer. I took a liking to him just so, no proof demanded, like, bread'n'fish multiplication and stuff. In fact, his trick about juvenilization of my worn-out passport was more than enough for me.

By the way, the chief under Chief also presented his credentials. One day during the midday break, he came to hold a trade-union meeting. (Ahem!)

We settled under the trees by the hostel. He got seated on a chair and took off his shoes, and socks too. Like, don't you think all talks of my clove foot are a stupid gossip now? Stuff and nonsense! But I am not the one to be hooked on by illusory chaff.

The devils of Makhno bandits lay down around in the shaded grass under the trees in their black *spetzovka*s. Only I was in the nylon shirt which I wore in the mine under the *spetzovka* jacket and every evening washed in the shower.

> (...nylon is ideal for washing: you rub it for six seconds flat and it's clean, and then it gets dry even faster...)

In the way of a polite, albeit arch, response, I also took off my helmet. Like, you wanna make me believe you've got no hooves? Come on, admire my hornlessness then!. All the other workers had their helmets on, especially Slavic Aksyanov.

And so it went on for some 10 minutes when suddenly the rooster crowed. Surprise! The chief, who's not Chief, shoved his socks into his pockets, and raced to the nearby country road, thrusting his feet into the shoes on the run. And there, as if from under the ground, popped up a biker in black and in a black-leather ribbed helmet, like those the miners wore in the days of the first five-year plans. And they whizzed off in the direction of New Dophinovka. Not clear enough? Who shoots away at the rooster crowing?

Not that I confronted with... well... the chief engineer, but there happened certain frictions. Like it was when a truck dumped a heap of coal for the winter, and I shoved all that anthracite into the stokehold. At the end of that day, he came from Vapnyarka and asked me, haughtily so, "Well, how much is you want? 3 rubles enough?"

I went amok: half-day in the sun, and he, like as if offering a pittance to a dirty wretch. Okay, you're the prince of darkness, but I am also a chosen, even if not initiated, one.

"No!" said I, "let I'll be paid the worth of my labor."

"You won't get such an amount then."

I did not believe him and the next day applied for a day-off and went to the Mining Management in Pole Explorers Square. I was shown the door of the chief accountant office, Weitzman was his name. No sooner had I stepped into his office than the phone on the desk rang. He took off the receiver, "You are listened to."

> (...just like that, word for word: "You're listened to." Clear, smooth, distanced. Without sticking his neck out for a fraction of a millimeter. That's some Weitzman for you!.)

I depicted the essence of the matter in hand, he got it at once and took out a thick book in a gray paperback *The Unified Norms and Tariffs*, and he found in it where it was about loading and unloading of loose coal and gave me to read. There it stood in black on white, that even if I were shoveling that coal in an area north of the Arctic Circle—to be paid with the highest northern coefficients applied—and with each shovelful of coal I were circling 3 times around the hostel, before heaving it into the stokehold window, so as to gain the bigger distance of moving the load—then, by the rates from that normative bible, I was entitled to the payment of 1 ruble and 20 kopecks.

> (...and it was revealed unto me, who did not know the truth hitherto, that to foremen, supervisors, engineers, etc., etc., should the workmen bow low for the lies added to work orders. Without the addition of false figures, the working class would die out long ago, together with their families. Pray for your benefactors and bread givers, O, workmen!
>
> But what bastard composed all those rates and tariffs? I'd like to share my shovel with them in a brotherly way...)

His diggings were near the Hunchback Bridge in Odessa. There he lived in a house of his own, together with his wife and their son, fifth-grader. He treated me to a glass of home-made tomato juice. (Ahem...) Everything as expected – some red, thick, brackish liquid. But could I say "no"? Margarita also drank it, at the annual ball of Satan, in Moscow. Yet until now, I brew the black tea after the recipe he shared... That evening he also shared his recollections about working in the Arctic, where, after work, he put a pair of bricks on an electric stove and seated his wife atop of them to bring into the working conditions for the night…

One time the impure attempted at a putsch, they wanted to change the layout of world stratification. The day before it, the mining engineer Pugachov popped up at the hostel and opened one of the locked doors in the corridor. Like, distributing to the miners some food products to be paid for later, on their payday.

I walked along the corridor and Slavic Aksyanov shouted to me from that room, "Come on, get it too!"

There were five Makhno devils inside the empty room and a box of "Prima" packs upon the desk without a chair; Pugachov was meting out from 5 to 10 packs each.

Food products, eh? Ammunition supplies! "No, thank you, "Belomor" is my smoke."

Going out, I still heard Slavic motivating the devils, "No fear! Youth will write off everything!"

The next day not a single traffic lights worked in Odessa. It was a day of complete bedlam; people were shouting at each other, and the trolleybuses were jostling and jumping like mad. There was no shooting, of course, because the putsch took place on a different level. However, by my estimations, it failed, as long as I was in time to buy *The World Atlas*, a thin booklet in a soft green paperback…

In Odessa of those days, the most stable and widely used expression of approval was "you can't but love!"

"What's your thought about Sonya's latest groom?"

"You can't but love!"

And, instead of "no" they were saying "dick to mama!" Yet, with Odessa-Mommy around, it sounded even patriotic.

"So, The Black-Sea Footballer won yesterday, or what?"

"Dick to mama!"

In the small park on Deribassov Street, there grew some unseen trees looking as if they had cast off their own bark. In the evening, the brass band played there, almost like in the times of Johann Strauss, but seldomer. And in some other park, in the daytime, I dived into the pool from the five-meter-tall tower, the air whistled in the ears during the dive. A little later two guys jumped off as well, holding hands, but it was a heels-first cannonball dive and one of them had black socks on. That way those jumpers were effacing my footprints to put off track any possible followers...

At the intercity phone calls station on Pushkin Street, they played a good joke on me. That time I made the order and waited, then went out thru the porchless door wide-open onto the sidewalk. The moment I lit a cigarette, the loudspeaker inside shouted, "Nezhyn! Is anyone waiting for

Nezhyn?!" I threw the cigarette into the trash bin by the door and ran back. "It's me! I am waiting!"

To which the telephone operator said on her microphone, "So, wait then!" The crowd in the hall split their sides. That again, they were saving me from something.

Some cat was waiting there too. They announced his number connected, "Chelyabinsk on line! Enter Booth 5!" And before going to where was told, he uttered with a bitter disappointment, "Eew!"

That's an enlightened one! By the booth number alone, he knew beforehand the pending talk's outcome!.

I got to know Odessa very well. On foot, for the most part. I found the Public Library Nr. 2; and Privvoz Bazaar, where the porters in blue smocks pushed station trolleys in front of them, shouting "Feet! Feet!" so that the crowd would give way to them warned by their shortened "Watch your feet!". There, in Privvoz, an old gypsy cast a curse on me with their witchcraft art; I did not get it what for, but she should know better or maybe I just popped up at the wrong split-second...

Factory of Gastric Juice; who would ever imagine there were such enterprises?!. When I was passing thru the yards of five-story blocks, mujiks at their "goat" game would bang the bones louder against the tables to shoo off the cats, so they would not run across the sidewalk in front of me. Also auxiliary allies...

To Odessa I was going by bus, only a couple of times on foot; it's only 20 kilometers or so all in all. And one time I walked from Vapnyarka to New Dophinovka along the seashore, over the cliff. In one place there stood some military installation behind the fence of barbed wire. The sentry yelled from there it was forbidden to pass by their site, approached and demanded to present my papers. I showed thru the wire my handkerchief with the sailing boat in the circle. He realized at once that the level was different, "Okay, get along..."

From up the cliff, the view was very beautiful. The sea was quiet, almost smooth, yet sparkled and glittered under the sun. Sometimes the wind rushed along to ripple the water and draw various types of galaxies. Spiral, for the most part. The wind was copying them from the clouds that hovered above the sea…

In Streetcar 5 going to the Arcadia beach, I saw Gray from our Stavropol construction battalion. It surprised me a little – four years had passed and he remained looking so young and, for some reason, in the black uniform of a sea cadet, in their cap with the ribbons hanging over the back.

I stood up and quietly asked into his ear, "Gray, is it you?" He did not respond, neither moved the tiniest bit although he heard me, dead sure...

And another time it was my father by a newsagent booth. He did not look like my father at all, I only recognized him by his voice. It was in that exactly voice he told me of the murderer, whom the camp director brought to a new murder.

When he spoke to me, I pretended that I was all too busy examining the portrait of psychiatrist Burdenko in the Ogonyok magazine cover, which hung behind the glass of the booth, so it was the seller who responded to him.

> (...confronted with the meetings of such a kind, anyone will start asking themselves: what's going on? But you can't get an answer to it if having no grasp on the conception of monad.
>
> Monad is a made in Germany gadget for philosophizing, which everyone understands to their personal liking. For someone, it might mean a singularity from a set, while for someone else – a whole set of singularities.
>
> For example, when a guy asks his girl, "Tell me! Am I just another one of many for you, or the only one from all their many?" Here, the second "one" in his question is that very monad or, maybe, vice versa...
>
> In some Indian Bible, there is a gaudy picture of a baby that crawls over the grass, a step ahead of him, a kid is running, before whom there walks a man just about to overtake a withered old geezer, and then again only the green of the grass. The picture is called "The Circle of Life". That is, from nothing to nothing.
>
> Now, together, they all comprise one monad because it's the same person.
>
> So, it only remains to assume, that monads can be formed in a different way; for example, by the timbre of a voice; and everything falls into place. It depends on the standpoint from which you are viewing the monad: here – it's your father, while on its other end – a homeless drifter speaks up to you by the stall with Burdenko.
>
> Of course, all that is a bit more complicated than to learn by rote: "if you stumbled with your left leg – everything would be okay, but if it was the right one – don't even try, turn back and go home." However, monad, as abstruse and hardly comprehensible as it is, still explains a lot...)

~ ~ ~

A certain Odessa Preferans player in his youth was a part to the illegal underground. But later he reformed and began to collaborate with the television studio of Odessa as a commentator on the latest criminal news. He even wrote a book sharing impressions from his bandit past, in which he claims that the year of your birth, and especially the summer period, was marked by an unseen, critically baneful, surge of violent crime in Odessa.

It’s a very rare case when a printed text failed to convince me because that summer I was there in person and never noticed anything of the kind. Which speaks in favor of the theory about the existence of parallel worlds. The reformed commentator and I lived in separate parallel worlds, therefore each of us was receiving different impressions from different worlds both of which had in common only the ordinal number of their current year. On the face of it, 2 separate worlds, despite their parallelism do overlap from time to time which explains a couple of criminally tinged episodes in course of otherwise quite quiet summer of ‘79.

In all of my reiterations to and detours within Odessa, I happened to observe just 2 occasions of contact and reciprocative penetration of our parallel worlds. The first one occurred on the morning bus Gvardeyskoye-Odessa when a young slob from the second seat on the left rebuked the driver for a minor change in the route thru the city outskirts.

Upon arrival at the bus station by the New Bazaar, the driver hurried from his cabin into the bus with apologies and technical (to some extent too-too obsequious) explanations. He was forgiven when the other passenger on the same seat spoke for him to her easily irritable companion...

The second interpenetration occurred in the building of the railway station, where I inquired a militiaman about the number of population in the city of Odessa. For an answer, he directed me to the police station on the first floor. The on-duty lieutenant, to whom I repeated the question, told me to wait for a while.

Obedient to his instruction, I leaned against the barrier separating us and watched as the red worms of his lips lustfully closed on, wrapping and twirling, the filter of his unlit cigarette, under the accompaniment of heavy thuds and loud shrieks behind my back.

With a fleeting glance in that direction, I registered a door opened to the next room, where a woman in a chiffon headscarf and the black robe of a janitor aptly wielded the hard handle of her wooden mop to knock the crap out of a bozo draped in only his red underpants. Same red underpants with seldom prints of blue tennis bats as on me, maybe, not as vividly chromatic because of being acquired a couple of years before mine. So I didn’t feel like watching his obviously lost match. Turning back, I dropped my eyes in meek concentration on the top of the high sturdy barrier separating me from the lieutenant… After getting the pleasure due to his rank and position, the officer lit the cigarette, and said that a million was not reached yet, maybe, somewhere about 600 000 people…

That's why, when on my next visit to the city and being late for the last bus to New Dophinovka, I preferred to spend the night in the greens inside the circular intersection in front of the railway station. It turned out to be completely deserted because the underground passage to it was unlit.

Having chosen the most distant from the lamppost bench, I lay down. The bench beams felt so hard that I recollected Edgar Poe killed on a bench in Baltimore, state of Maryland, for $40—a literary fee he had just collected—and partly pulled out the breast pocket in my shirt the advance I received on that day in Pole Explorers Square, like a coquettish handkerchief made of three-ruble notes, for the purpose of self-training and development of my personal courage. The traffic along the circular intersection had almost ceased, but the bench became even harder. However, I

kept my eyes shut for the principle's sake because the night is for sleeping. So I was not asleep when there came the tiny sounds of cautious steps over the rounded walk.

He came up and for about a minute stood over me lying on the bench, with the Edgar Poe mustache, in a blue T-shirt and the Soviet three-ruble banknotes sticking out from the breast pocket on it. Then he left, keeping as quiet as he was when approaching. For the sake of principle and training, I did not open my eyes to see who it was.

In the morning, I woke up on the same bench rather chilled and stiff as a board but, unlike the great American romantic, alive. A flock of ravens flew croaking in the dawn sky, flapping their wings. Seemingly, the same ones that coasted above Nezhyn heading north-east on the Day D. It did take them a long time to get over to Odessa. A feather dropped from the wing of one in their squadron and, somersaulting in zigzags, kept falling down.

The face upturned, I followed the jerky trajectory and walked to intercept it, not heeding the dug up beds with sickly flowers. At the meeting point, I outstretched my palm towards the black dodger, caught it, and went back to the asphalted walk. There I dropped the catch tenderly into a trash bin saying, "Not while I'm around, please."

> (...a lesser-known German poet from the first half of the 20th century once cared to bemoan his own unworthiness, otherwise, he would not allow for the world's self-massacre.
>
> Few of the venerable laureates rise to so a deep comprehension of a poet's responsibility for the fate of the world. Inertly cling they to the trivial standpoints and rituals of their time, yet if you think about it closely...)

However, just to think is not enough, it's also necessary to think out, as Valentin Batrak, aka Lyalka, cared to say somewhere…

On reaching the deadline for my return to take you and Eera over to Odessa, there, in fact, was no place to bring you to. However, with the word given, I had no choice but come back, and at least explain the reasons for the postponement of the move. I had no money for the travel, neither anyone who I addressed for a loan. The urgent need brought about the idea to exchange the wedding ring for money at the pawnshop.

While I found it in the city, it was already open with the line starting outside the front door... The pawnshop was one long room with barriers along its three walls. In the sheet glass partitions atop the barriers, there were small rounded windows one of which even had iron grating. It was to that very window, the farthest one, for all that crowd to queue. At the time when the pawnshop closed for the midday break, I was at some four meters from that window.

In the breast pocket of my T-shirt, there was the ring that I hardly managed to rip off the finger the night before. Even the soap and water from the washstand nearby the hostel were of little

help. Along with those self-inflicted tortures, I remembered the projectionist booth in the Plant Park and once again felt sorry for Olga.

The pawnshop opened afresh and, on waiting in the line for one more hour, I apprehensively handed the ring in because the person before me failed – her earrings did not pass the check for genuine gold. My ring proved acceptable though and I received 30 rubles, as well as the pawnshop's ticket…

The following morning, I came to the New Bazaar and bought a blue plastic mesh-bag, and 4 kilos of apricots to fill it with, they were not fully ripe though. Then I went to the booth with flowers and said that I needed 3 red roses.

For the flower girl, it sounded like a clandestine signal word, and from some special place behind the counter she took out minikin roses of dark red, exactly 3, on long sturdy stalks. "You meant these?"

"Sure."

From the New Bazaar, I went to the airport—not much better than the one in Stavropol—and stood in the line till the midday break. When the ticket office window was closed, I remained standing nearby, like a statue with the 3 red roses in my hand, and only put the apricots on the floor under the window. Keeping 4 kilos for an hour seemed too much of a strain for my hand.

After I bought the ticket, there remained 4 hours before the departure and I was already tired of life with my hands busy holding something. I took the flowers and the fruits to the automatic storage cells, but I could not leave the roses inside because I felt sorry for them; they would surely welk in there with the air and light cut off. Looking around a small corridor, I found the janitors' room and asked for permission to leave the flowers and apricots there. They agreed and I went out into the city hands-free, but I did not venture too far.

At six I came after the roses. The janitors were washing the floor in the corridor, and one of them told me I'd better wait. I insisted on getting them right away to be in time for the plane departing in half-hour. She grinned and, without further arguing, let me take the roses sticking out of one of their tin pails filled with water. The janitor only warned that they had treated themselves to the apricots a little bit.

I went to a long shed on the edge of the take-off field and, together with other passengers having tickets for that flight, waited till midnight because each half-hour the loudspeakers announced a delay of the flight to Kiev. My delayed fellow-travelers also tried the apricots and approved.

After midnight, in the crude glare of the arc lamps along the runway, two stewardesses were counting us on the stairs to have no more than 27 passengers because we were an odd load for a potluck flight to Kiev by a smaller aircraft, AN-24. When onboard, it took some time to become warm after the chilly night breeze from the sea during that long wait... Since then I eschew arguing with janitors…

At the takeoff, I was fighting down the thoughts that they might have brought the asphalt while I am away. In course of the mentioned meeting of the trade-union members stretched in the grass, the chief engineer informed that the construction team had come across sharps in their scores. For those unfamiliar with the music notation, he put two fingers of his left hand over two on the right one, crosswise, representing prison grates. Therefore, the finishing works would be continued by those wishing to live in the intended hostel. The Aksyanovs and I enrolled for moving over there, and the Bessarabian family abstained.

The projected hostel was located about 20 meters from the old one, and it also was a former cattle-farm building. Each apartment in the hostel under reconstruction was of two spacious rooms and a single standard window. I chose the one looking on the sea inlet.

However, the walls in our would-be home still had to be plastered, and the window awaited its glazing, but I liked our place all the same, even though it had neither doors nor any floor yet.

Once, they dumped a truckload of hot asphalt between the old and the new hostels to make flooring in the rooms. Aksyanov together with his assistant at the stone-cutting machine were moving the asphalt with a wheelbarrow to the Aksyanovs' rooms, while I hauled it with a pair of pails to ours. They managed to cover with the asphalt both of his rooms, and I only half of just one, yet making the flooring of higher quality, before the heap outside was finished off. That's why, while the plane was gaining altitude, I did not want any asphalt were brought without me around.

Then I started looking out of the porthole. The moon was absent from the cloudless sky, but the stars were shining, thousands of them. And the lights of cities and towns far below were shimmering too, no bigger than the distant stars. And I thought I'd rather for the pilot not to lose his way among all those stars from everywhere. But then, deep in the darkness under the plane wing, I made out separate lights, maybe in some village, whose configuration was the exact replica of 1 from the only 2 constellations I could ever single out in the night sky. The village lights repeated positioning of the stars in the Little Bear, and I relaxed because it's impossible to get off the right course with the North Star in view…

~ ~ ~

At six in the morning, I got off the Kiev-Moscow train at the station of Nezhyn and by the first bus of the day came to Red Partisans. The door was opened by Ivan Alexeyevich who hardly recognized me because I had become so lean. I took the blue plastic mesh with the apricots to the kitchen and carried the dark red roses to the bedroom past the folding coach-bed in the living room, where the mother-in-law was already starting to stir.

Both of you were asleep. I inserted the roses stems into the small violet vase by the pier mirror on the table and looked behind the window curtain. The handkerchief with the anchor was gone from the windowsill. Okay, I could find out later... I undressed, went to bed, and hugged Eera in her long white nightie.

"Oh! You?"

"Yes."

"So scraggy?!"

"Hush, don’t wake up the baby."

Then Eera told me that her sister Vitta was on a visit in Odessa, and wanted to see me at the mine. She reached the village of New Dophinovka, but a villager named Natalia Kurilo advised against going any farther, because of a too difficult road.

"Yes, that Natalia sits at the mine office in the pit up there."

"She complained that you didn't listen to anyone but the foreman."

"How could she know? She sits up there."

"She must know if she's saying... And how is all over there?"

"There all is so... classy... the sea is... well, in general... ships above the field..."

"But you got so too skinny... Have you had sex with someone over there?"

"You crazy?!"

"Quiet! Don't wake the baby! Well... you were doing something right now... you've never been doing that before."

"Ah... I got it from the stone-cutting machine... her disks move that way."

"What's your position there?"

"Some long-named one – the assistant of the stone-cutting machine operator; but, to myself, I call me shorter – a phallic associator."

"What's that?"

"From old Greek. It's a long story."

"And what are the housing conditions there?"

"We'll have two rooms. So big. Tolik from Machine 2 says they are well located. Looking away from the winter winds. And the sea inlet under the window."

"But look at yourself! Thin as a rake!"

"Hush! The baby!."

But all the same you got awake…

"Look, where's the handkerchief that I've left on the windowsill?"

"What handkerchief? I've never seen any."

In general, that's correct. To see a thing you have to know what you're looking for. I, for example, could not recognize the sea at once.

> (...so the sailing boat had not found its anchorage and, later on, it disappeared too. For all I know, it might be still sailing expanses of the universe somewhere...)

It was not what you'd call inspiring news to learn from Eera, that in the maternity hospital she was informed that her hymen had not been completely busted, and you had to finish it off from inside.

Though embarrassed, I still did not feel much difference, if any, after my wife lost her virginity in such an unconventional way. Yes, there was a certain feeling of guilt for that overly stealthy night in Bolshevik, yet since then I always was shooting the bolt my level best, unreservedly. Besides, she was not the first virgin to give birth...

> (...leaving aside the Holy Family, our particular case was the result of textual programming thru the novel by a French writer, Herve Bazin, which I read back in my adolescence.
>
> Although there was no childbirth in that work, I still should not be allowed to read just anything at all...)

I went to Konotop to collect warm clothes, the sheepskin coat, rubber high boots. My father gave me his navy black pea-jacket with copper buttons in 2 upright rows. I even took my guitar with me, because I was moving in earnest to stay there.

And in Konotop, they also kept grumbling that there had remained only half of me, but I never was in finer fettle indeed… My mother wrapped the things in a white cloth and sewed it up; it turned out a bulky and thick bale.

Yet, I had to do one more thing. To do and – cut and run. To do, and lie low at the bottom, in the mine "Dophinovka"...

> (...throughout all those five years plus, I was perfectly aware that everything should be paid for. Nothing is given for nothing. And I don't mean money for pot, which goes without saying. I mean the main payment for getting stoned, high, and on the flights. And the closer to the final full-stop in the trough of the common urinal at the Kiev

intercity bus station, the deeper I realized that I even knew who exactly was paying the unreasonably high—more expensive than any money—price for my buzz.

I had neither desire nor occasion to share that knowledge to anyone, because it was so complete crazy nonsense. Nutty hooey. That's why I silenced it and kept it hidden and buried away, even from myself, but it came back to me over and over again, even at my not-stoned moments, that I was irredeemably indebted to the long-suffering people of Cambodia sweating in the swelter of the sub-equatorial hothouse climate of South-Eastern Asia. And there was no forgiveness for me...

Nothing comes from nowhere, and it is the immutable truth. The tactile sensations at my maiden getting high, in the stoker-house of the construction battalion, established an inextricable link between blowing jive and getting smashed in the brains.

Subsequently, the rigor of the correlative interdependency dissolved, but the buzz continued to flow in. Which gives rise to a question: if not me, then who is smashed in the brains?

By the end of the five-year-plus period there came the answer. The Khmer Rouge troops, when seizing another village, killed its inhabitants, the same Cambodians as themselves. To save the ammo, they were butchering them by bamboo club blows against their skulls. Then they turned the bodies on their backs and photographed dead faces, like for a passport. In those pictures, the right eye is half-closed and the left one bulging out.

I saw them. Multiple rows of those pictures—dead people with feline faces—were regularly placed in the central newspapers. They looked like some different non-human race, them those people with their, as if skinned, faces. I had what to feel guilty about.

Of course, after the events accompanying my first flight to Odessa, the peasants' brains were not any longer being smashed out for me, which did not stop the show so that someone else would get a kick.

In Odessa, I found myself amid a universal battle of who knows who against whoever else. In the course of inconceivable vicissitudes, I became a some who's ally, making enemies with whoever else, still remaining in the complete dark as to who is who?

One thing was totally clear though, that those, with whom, as willed by fate, I happened to be on the different sides of the barricades, would not fail to track me down and square the accounts. It's no coincidence that, the moment I got off the Kiev-Moscow train in Nezhyn, a window in one of its cars opened and a glassy-eyed (apparently from the monad of the chief engineer) spit out a long streak of saliva on the platform. He undoubtedly was leaving a signal mark for other militants from their dark legion where to pick up the trace of my further perambulations and follow my subsequent movements up to Konotop. And there, they would easily and inevitably discover the cannabis

plantation at the end of the garden of my parents' *khutta* in the Settlement. With incalculable and unimaginable consequences of the most horrid nature.

My duty before the unknown allies, and before the remains of still not finished off peasants at their squalid villages in the humid depths of jungles in South-Eastern Asia prompted the only right decision...)

In the shed at Decemberists 13, I took the bayonet-type spade and went to the plantation in the remotest bed.

They stood proud of their almost three-meter height; issuing the piercing rich aroma.

...forgive me, I know you're eager to live, forgive that I was late for that train to Odessa, but now I have to do what I have to, forgive me...

And they were falling—one after another, one next to another, one on top of another—from the bayonet strikes piercing deep, slicing the roots, cutting the life off…

I stacked them in a high pile, went back to the shed and returned with the jerrycan of gasoline. The crackling fire rose up, the thick white smoke floated.

Alerted by auntie Zeena, my mother hurried to the garden, "Sehryozha!. What are you... Why?. How is it?.."

"It must be done."

She left, and my brother Sasha came instead, "Sehryoga, what are you at?"

"It must be done."

My brother always believed that I knew what I was doing, even when I did not know it myself. He stopped asking me and just stood there, and we both watched the fire turning the dense green of the trunks and branches dumped on a pile into black charred sticks and fine ash, brittle, white…

~ ~ ~

The aircraft landed in the Odessa airport at midnight and I managed to be in time for the 6.00 bus from the New Bazaar bus station. Outside the city, irresistible slumber overcame me so that I missed the stop and woke up only after 300 meters past it. At my request, the driver stopped the bus atop the ascend, and I crossed the windbreak belt.

In the garden of the outermost cottage amid the thinning dusk of the retreating night, an elderly mujik in his underwear and a woman in a white nightgown swept, for some reason, the beds with brooms. They moved in a strange, robot-like, way. The mujik's eyes were filmed with the

glassiness. I did not see the woman's eyes though, she was careful to keep them averted. Rather strange agricultural practices for so early an hour, but I could hardly be surprised by anything already.

In my four-day absence, they did not bring any asphalt. But the pinkwashed outside plaster of the old hostel walls had got spattered with blue splashes and dispersed lines as if to camouflage the barrack. But why blue?.

I got in the everyday groove at the mine. The weather changed because one day coming back from Odessa, I found that in my pocket remained just a single three-kopeck patina-blackened coin. "That's not money," thought I to myself and threw the coin back over my shoulder, among the trees of the windbreak belt. For exactly 3 days thereafter, the cold wind blew from the sea, refuting my dismissive opinion of the 3 kopecks, and making me get the message in the byword "to throw money to the wind".

The electrician, my neighbor opposite the corridor, died on the road from Chabanka before reaching the hostel. They found him 3 days later. I always knew that was a dangerous stretch of the road. In summer, there were constantly flying fluffy spherical balls, like to sea mines, but white and smaller, of course. Probably, one of them scraped the defunct, when he was unaware or failed dodging.

They buried him in the village cemetery, on the cliff between the highway and the sea. Kapitonovich was carrying a wooden cross ahead of the coffin, like a banner, but he himself had a sash of a long narrow towel tied in a diagonal loop from one of his shoulders, the way best men of grooms adorn themselves at village weddings, instead of pinning a handkerchief up the jacket sleeve as was the custom at funerals in Konotop. What else might you expect of them? They've heard the song but got the wrong sow by the ear.

In the father's black pea-jacket with yellow buttons, I presented a colorful figure, like, a seaman from the black-and-white movie "We are from Krondstadt", but I also helped to fill up the grave. Then we were taken back to the hostel by bus. The women from the mine office in the pit prepared the wake feast from their home supplies. I wolfed a disgracefully enormous amount of every viand like on the visit to the Tshombe's field camp in my student years…

The repaired radio set was brought back to the hostel, and I had to move into the room of the diseased electrician. Soon Vasya, the new roof-fastener, joined me there. At first, I doubted his sex, when accidentally noticed red-brown stains on his bedsheets, as if from menstruation. He hurried to explain, that they were from a tomato that rolled under his blanket and he kicked it to squash in sleep, although I hadn't been asking about anything at all. That hostel's just another Bellamy Isle with everyone around reading your thoughts before you had the time to think them off. However, what simple explanations might sometimes be found for incomprehensible, at first glance, facts…

Autumn came into its own. I inserted glass into the window frame of the respective room in our would-be two-room apartment, however, they still were not bringing any asphalt... And so it went on in its everyday manner until the moment when the chief engineer came from Vapnyarka and said that I was announced wanted in the all-Union hunt, and the mining management received a letter from the NGPI with accusations of sheltering a runaway who shunned working off at the place of his appointment.

"So, write the application."

"What application?"

"Requesting to fire you of your own volition."

"I have no such wish."

"We cannot retain you here after such a letter."

As I stubbornly negated any desire for leaving, a compromise was found, based on one of many articles in the Labor Code of the USSR: "dismissal by agreement between the parties". Thus, instead of a chosen, I became just a party...

In the end, I had a parting walk about Odessa streets in the sheepskin coat wide open, like a soldier from the Peasant Army of Nestor Makhno, and in rubber high boots bravely splashing across the puddles left by the recent heavy rains. When back in the hostel, I packed them in a bale with the rest of my clothes and the tools which I had started to collect already, one by one: a hammer, an ax, a saw, an iron, an electric water heater, and a white enamel kettle.

> (...the night I was bringing it from Odessa it was real dark with some primeval darkness that you meet once or twice in your lifespan, darker than in abandoned galleries without the flashlight. All the way from the Dophinovka village to the same named mine I was singing to perk the kettle up, not let it get too spooky. No, not whistling in the dark but singing and shuffling the road too so as not to miss the right forks, all the way to the farm-like barracks of the miner’s hostel, which I could see by simply groping at that time, all the songs I could remember. Maybe, for personal tone up as well, yet only in part for it is a disgrace for a chosen which I was at the moment to be afraid of darkness. Only in the dark you can see light and become enlightened, right? And become an initiated chosen. Only they found me there and cut off and out of that game for kids. Damn!.)

The bale was taken to the station and sent off by a luggage car. Then I returned to the hostel where a recently bought briefcase and sports-bag Aerobica were sitting together with the guitar, before starting to the airport the following morning.

Slavic Aksyanov dropped into our room. We finished off a whole pan of fried potatoes under "The Bolero" by Ravel from Vasya's receiver. I told Slavic to fix the door to the toilet booth above the sea inlet. It was kicking back in the tall grass, I had seen it there. He swore to execute

my last wish. However, just in case, I threatened that if he did not, I would haunt him the way the Hamlet's father's ghost was molesting his sonny. A genuine funk flashed in his eyes. Who would have ever supposed that even they were afraid of spooks?!.

~ ~ ~

Eera told that they had sent a letter from the Transcarpathia to the institute, reporting my absence from the appointed school. Gaina Mikhailovna was summoned to Rector, who demanded of her to disclose my current location. After Rector declared that in summer he had personally met me in Odessa, she was forced to give away my affiliation with the mine. Now she was going to have troubles at work, and my diploma would be taken away unless the Republican Ministry of Education annulled my appointment.

I had to urgently go to Kiev, as far as the metro station named after Karl Marx, and up the street starting from The October Revolution Square to a gray-stone building in a row of similar ones, yet different to them by its sign of the Republican Ministry of Education, and up the white steps of polished marble to a tall leather-lined door on the second floor…

Head of the department in charge of shirkers, surnamed Baranov, looked 5 years older than me and superbly refined with the appropriate chiseling, grinding, and polishing as required by his position. The only chink in his armor was the single blonde hair on the dark gray shoulder of his jacket, donned over a snug woolen waistcoat thru whose narrow cut glimpsed a thin-pin-striped necktie against on the Tattersall shirt of squares as fine as those in the elementary school students copybooks for Arithmetic – unpierceable coat of mail.

> (...yes, because the clothes we wear are not for just airing our dress-code. Their main purpose is to protect us and not only from the weather, which is too trivial. First and foremost, they have to protect us from other humans more adequately clad for the current situation.
>
> Remember that Yalta Conference? Stalin and Churchill in the greatcoats of higher commanders at their respective armed forces and Franklin D. Roosevelt, in between the iron-clad rhinoceroses, flashing his democratic chic? Guess whose country had to bury their leader a couple of months later? I can't keep back the tears of condolence watching his naive necktie and defenseless fly in the pictures.
>
> But then who knows? FDR might have been in a suicidal mood right then...)

He glibly trotted it out that our state for 4 years bore expenses to give me the higher education free of charge, and it was time to compensate the charity by honest work in the Transcarpathia or say goodbye to my diploma.

I did not waste time on useless arguing. We both knew it perfectly well that the interests of state was the ace in trump suit, there was nothing to counter it with. My defense was built on my passionate desire to work in the field of enlightenment of the younger generations, and nowhere else but on the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, yet how about my family?

He encouraged me to take you and Eera over there.

And what about the second or, rather, first of my daughters?

The presence of Lenochka was a surprise for him. By the force of inertia, he suggested deporting her together with the rest.

I had to show my passport to prove that she was the product from my previous marriage. After a bitter pause, I admitted lack of information of her mother's current whereabouts.

That was the checkmate. Großmeister Baranov had not been trained to parry such moves and, having got to Zugzwang, acknowledged that I had a really swirly plot. I would get the free diploma—namely, the cancellation of my obligations to return my debt to the state by honest work at the place I was appointed to—if there be presented the reference from the Head of Street Committee, that Lenochka lived at 13, Decemberists Street in the city of Konotop.

Meanwhile, the bale sent from Odessa arrived at Nezhyn. The tools did not impress my father-in-law, but he got delighted with the teapot strainer. It was his long-term dream to have such a one, only you could not find it in stores even for ready money... Eera and I started discussing at which of the construction enterprises in Nezhyn I should apply for a job to get an apartment as soon as possible when she suddenly said that I needed to be checked, as advised by her mother.

I was a little surprised because medical check was the must when you applied for a job, even without her mother's advice. As it turned out, I had to understand that there was a need for special examination, to check if I was normal at all. Some traits in my behavior were giving rise to certain fears and threatened to disrepute in the public eye the otherwise totally respectable, if not for me, family of Eera's parents.

For instance, quite recently I walked the streets in torn shoes, and I also collected every mote of dust around the baby's carriage, and any question, even of the most trivial nature, made me think for too long before answering, and when she was in the maternity hospital, I came home in the middle of night and declared that the rain was warm. Besides, Eera was shocked by the news from Konotop about my fanatical auto-da-fe of the cannabis plantation, which, though not included in the list of deviations, spoke volumes...

I had nothing to counter with, it was the King and Queen pair from trump suit, she was right on each and every point.

Yes, shortly before that talk, on a clear peaceful autumn day, I went out for a walk wearing my shoes. They were not torn, of course, but fairly worn-out along the sidewalks of Odessa and country roads in the adjacent Komintern district. The walk inspired an elegiac mood. I recollected the distant galaxies on the smooth sea under the steep cliffs near Vapnyarka, the endlessly long street of Kotovsky's Road, and the ridiculously short one of Sholem Aleichem walked by those brown leather shoes with lengthwise incut pieces the tops of toe caps. They were sort of a spaceship on the return from an interstellar expedition across the universe – still alive, but hopelessly out of vogue... When I was taking them off in the hallway, Gaina

Mikhailovna remarked that it was time to use some warmer footwear. I felt really pleased with such caring attentiveness from my mother-in-law...

And I could not deny the delayed quality of my reaction to any questioning. Each inquiry that I was addressed with fired up an inaudibly rumbling computer in my mind (although I did not even know the word "computer" then) revving in a hectic round of the combinatorial analyses of all the possible responses to choose the one whose value would not lose its validity even in the most unforeseeable future.

> (...an idiot! All that, in fact, was needed:
>
> "A?. Yes,.. Hmm..."...)

As for the entrenched defense line around your carriage, I have already mentioned it. Nonetheless, even fully aware of my innocence, I never thought of debating or proving anything—especially since I had no excuse for neither the warm rain nor the annihilation of cannabis in merciless conflagration—so I just went where Eera led me...

It was a corridor on the second floor in an unfamiliar building with wide floorboards painted red. The place was rather crowded. On the whitewashed wall, there hung a sheet of Whatman paper with a picture executed with crayons in the technique of *The Funny Pictures* magazine where a kettle addressed a washcloth with the question, "Why did you tell the saucer I was a colander?"; most likely, a gift from some art lover patronizing the institution. A young man in the army officer pea-jacket without any insignia was happily contemplating the picture. His forage cap was tilted a sliver of a notch on a screwballish side.

Eera entered one of the offices to state complaints. Then they called me in, but no conversation followed. The doctor, addressing exclusively Eera, announced that I should be examined in Chernigov because he was not qualified for the like cases, not even competent.

> (...exactly as my father used to say: "They are sitting there, getting their salary but when you turn to them – 'I am not Copenhagen!' is all they ever can give out!"...)

The Chernigov psychiatric hospital was located 4 kilometers from the city, in full correspondence to the nearby bus stop named "The 4th kilometer". The gate in the tall concrete wall of the institution was conveniently nearby the bus stop. The collection of modern huge-block buildings behind the wall would readily beautify even the city center by its architectural style, were it not located outside it.

We bypassed the huge red-tiled forms of various height; some of them were bridged with indoor galleries or connected with lower structures. Eera was obviously oppressed by that stodgy Bau Stile void of fanciful conceits, quite understandably though, not everyone appreciates that particular variety of architecture and I, personally, would sooner pull for works by Corbusier too.

I escorted silent Eera, looking glum and sullen at the moment, to the required building where we were accepted in a small one-window office by a dark-haired woman in a doctor's smock named

Tamara...er...Tamara...well, I am sorry, her patronymic escaped my mind. At the desk by the window, there sat a man of a well-trained carcass, also in white.

Tamara hospitably invited us to get seated on the soft sofa in a white cloth case alongside the wall and retired to the armchair opposite it. There followed a conversation of nothing in particular, but when she asked me about my preferences in music, the man by the window started to prompt, "Variety, of course!" which convinced me that his presence was not for just to ensure Tamara's security, if I were a violently deviated case. So I had to honestly admit having more than one preference: Ella Fitzgerald and Johann Sebastian Bach, because I do not drive a fool about the things that really matter.

Tamara told Eera that deviations of my kind were not of dangerous nature, however, if so was Eera's wish and if I did not mind, they could keep me for more close observation.

I did not mind, only warned that on Saturday it was my brother's wedding to which Eera and I had been invited and, if Tamara considered it acceptable, I would come back to the 4th kilometer on Monday. Upon my word of honor.

Tamara most kindly concurred and saw us out into the corridor. From behind the glazed door in its end, there came a muffled noise of a multitudinous assemblage…

~ ~ ~

By that time my brother Sasha had already moved from PMS to KhAZ and was working on some sophisticated milling-grinding machine... The KhAZ was not the KhAZ itself, but only a branch of the Kharkov Aviation Plant. They did not assemble any planes at the branch, but produced spare parts of most different configurations, packed them in boxes, and sent to KhAZ or to its other branches in some other cities. In Konotop, the KhAZ branch was named, for shortness, just KhAZ and everyone was eager to get a job there because of high wages. Sasha earned 200 rubles a month! The rest of the workers got a lower payment because there was just one machine tool of so superb high-precision. Another advantage of KhAZ was its location in the Settlement, you could come home for the midday break and have your *havvage*.

Unfortunately, there was a drawback too, KhAZ made you work longer than just 8 hours a day. No, there were no labor legislation violations. Sasha was leaving his workplace at 5 sharp, but his work overtook him when even at home. He complained to me that even watching football on TV, he contemplated his working plans for the following day: which spare parts to work on in the morning, and which after the midday break. I felt sorry for my brother, but didn't know how to help him out…

In the Settlement, earning 200 rubles a month, you could start up a family of your own without hesitation. Sasha's chosen one, Lyouda, worked at "The Optics" store in Zelenchuk Area and she also was from the Settlement. Besides, she was a really enviable bride having two *khutta*s or, rather, each of her estranged, though not divorced, parents had a separate one, which guaranteed the young family immediate solution to the problem of housing, one way or the other. Who would decline living in clover? Thus, my brother became an Adoptee.

Eera was going to buy bed linen as the wedding present, but all the traces of such goods since long had disappeared from the stores. The explanation of the fact provided by the planned economy we lived under deducted that particular shortage from the World Olympics which Moscow was to host the following year, and the mentioned commodity would be needed for doing beds in the Olympic Village.

> (...in a flash-forward, I can assure that two years later bedding remained a sharp deficit. I just cannot imagine what those guest sportspersons were doing to it in the Olympic Village...)

So, for the wedding present Eera bought a nice jug of red transparent glass, wisely reasoning that the bedsheets would wear out very quickly but the jug—if not broken—could stand in the hutch until the golden anniversary...

Since the wedding happened to coincide with our mother's birthday, I wanted to present her flowers. Gaina Mikhailovna insisted that no flowers could be bought on November 24, yet I went to the bazaar all the same.

On the bridge over the Oster, I saw a man holding a bouquet in his hands, in a company of two ladies. They were just standing there, looking anything but traders. However, I felt their presence on the bridge was no accident, came up, and asked if he would sell me the flowers... My mother-in-law's bewilderment had no limits, but I knew that somewhere around Odessa or in the worlds parallel to it, I had done something right, which was not forgotten by the unknown yet grateful allies…

We went to Konotop by 15.15 local train. The wedding party took place in a three-room *khutta* on Sosnowska Street in the Settlement. The flowers caused surprise even there. The surprise grew exponentially, when I presented them not to the bride. Then Sasha remembered what day it was, and assured the guests it was okay.

The following was a traditional Settlement wedding of an Adoptee. The only difference that at the party I gave up smoking. It happened when my neighbor at the table started to convince me of the impossibility of kicking off the habit, especially at a party of any kind. I put out the lit cigarette and that was all there to it.

> (...I am a non-smoker even now. That was my way of kicking it...)

The next morning at Decemberists 13, Eera announced my intended trip to the 4th kilometer by Chernigov. There followed a stormy exchange of views with my parents. They opposed the very idea of the trip and demanded it's cancellation. No matter how hard I tried, they could not understand that I had promised to be there on Monday. How to survive in a world where you could not rely even on your own word?

Eventually, Eera took sides with my parents, and they continued trying to prevail upon me in concerted efforts. Only Lenochka was sitting silent aside in the far end of the folding coach-bed.

"So what? Gave him education for your own misery?" my father reproached my mother. Then he turned to me, "We've done all that we could for you. Now it's your turn. Do as we ask. Or we're not the stuff? What are our wrongs? Tell it!"

"Okay, I'll tell!" responded I, and slammed my fist at the table top, "Why did you stop writing poetry?"

There happened a sharp change in my father's demeanor. In obvious embarrassment, he was turning his eyes away from both his wife and daughter-in-law. Even in the deep wrinkles over his forehead, there appeared never observed marks of shyness, "Well... I was young... it was the war then..."

> (...that's life, huh? You start to drive a fool and unexpectedly run into a frank confession...
>
> By now he gave up the poetry for good and switched over to oratory. In long winter evenings, he puts his felt high boots on and goes out to the meeting of neighbors of his age, under the lamp on the post by the Kolesnikov's *khutta*. And there they stand on the trampled snow, discussing the news from yesterday's news program "Time", hotly debating whether Muammar Gaddafi's a manly man or the same clown as Yasser Arafat...)

In the way of a compromise, they decided that before leaving for Chernigov, I would go with my mother to local psychiatrist Tarasenko from whom (here my father narrowed his eyes threateningly) no one had ever a chance of getting off-hook. Then I escorted Eera to the station, and all the way there she tried to persuade me not to go to the 4th kilometer. However, my word to Tamara was out and past recalling…

In the large light building of the Konotop Medical Center, not far from the Avangard Stadium in the Central Park of Recreation, people were crowding next to each and every door, and only the door to the office of psychiatrist Tarasenko stood out by its forlorn solitude. When my mother and I entered his office, Tarasenko explained the phenomenon by the insufficient awareness of the population, while there, overseas, every fourth citizen kept visiting a psychiatrist.

Tarasenko's office was equipped with his assistant nurse and the standard medical office furniture. However, the furniture was arranged very strangely. The oddity was created by the positioning of the desk. Besides being put in the center of the room, it was also turned the wrong way, with its drawers to the door.

I was asked to get seated at the desk. My mother sat on a chair by the wall, and the present medical team of two stood on either side of me. I did not like this whole disposition intended to inflate my megalomania—you sit there like Chairman Mao, and those in white are standing around as an errand-boy with an errand-girl. So, I pushed the chair a tad bit back from the desk,

turned it 90 degrees and, stretching my legs out, put one foot on the other in the attitude of a kicking back cowboy.

And now Tarasenko and his partner rushed to pull abruptly and slam back the desk drawers, with bang and crash... Getting midst so violent a company, I, naturally, pulled my legs back but kept sitting, yet with my ears pricked up: what the heck?

On making sure that I hadn't jumped out of the door, neither tried to flee climbing up the window blinds, Tarasenko stopped the test and announced that I was as healthy as a bull.

"Tell it to him!" exclaimed my mother, sobbing, "He wants to go to the psychiatric hospital in Chernigov!"

"What for?"

"His wife has sent him there!"

"Is she a doctor?"

"No!"

"Why then? People can send you anywhere. Is he her slave, or what?"

"Yes! Yes! He's a slave!"

> (...look here, Joseph Yakovlevich, aka the Beautiful, you were sold into slavery by your brothers and that hurt, right?
>
> How would you feel being sold by your own mother?..)

Tarasenko once again forbade me, already as to a slave, to go anywhere, and I together with my mother left his office.

On the way to the streetcar stop, my mother asked, "Now, you see? Got convinced?"

"It does not change anything."

"If they do something to you, I'll kill her!" said my mother with a suppressed sob.

"Mom," said I, "what kind of a book have you read recently?"

Of course, I knew perfectly well that since long my mother had forsaken reading books, yet you're still supposed to forward one or another clue to politely maintain a conversation, you know…

Because of the check to examine my head before submitting me into slavery, and further inconsistencies in the train traffic timetables, I reached the 4th kilometer by Chernigov late at night. However, the stipulated Monday was not over yet and I started to knock at the iron gate, giving rise to discontent yells from the securities in the check-entrance house. They switched on the light and asked what it was I was at, the name of Tamara became the password. Two more orderlies in blue flannel gowns came up and took me to the waiting room.

There I submitted my clothes and received in exchange pajamas, as well as a pair of army *kirza* high boots. The left boot was my size, but the right one squeezed the foot inhumanely. Probably, that was retaliation for disturbing them at so late an hour.

Then thru the cold darkness, I was taken to the fifth unit and handed over to the paramedic on duty. He led me into a wide empty corridor-hall lit dimly, because of the late hour, with a pair of shaded lamps in the wall, reflected by the dark glass of a distant window in the opposite end of the corridor. Glazed doors to the wardrooms were lined along the hall's left wall. The paramedic escorted me into one of the wardrooms, pointed at a free bed, and went out…

In the obscure light seeping in thru the glass in the door, I could make out half-dozen beds laid with wrapped up figures, and ghostly whitish nightstands in between. I undressed and lay down, suppressing involuntary fear...

Apparently, so late addition made the population of the ward to keep low under their blankets, but gradually they thawed out. Someone invisible asked me from out of the corner if it was me. They hush-hashed at him and he fell silent... I refrained from giving any answer. Thru the glazed door, there came a faraway cry from down the corridor and cut off too... I lay—a wrapped up figure as everyone else—rejoicing that I still managed to do it on Monday, and felt the upsurging alertness because I understood who I was among.

"So what, Kostya, would you like some home-made sausage now?" asked one of the invisible figures of his invisible gossip.

I was tickled with irresistible laughter; how quickly they managed to figure me out!. When Eera and I were leaving Chernigov after our joint visit to the 4th kilometer, Eera bought a coil of home-made sausage at the station. It was really delicious.

Now, the brainstorming team in the darkness entered an expert discussion of that very sausage, and I, amused by their getting on track so casually, tried to choke the laughter and snuffle it away thru the nostrils, biting the corner of my pillowcase, so that they would not take me for a psycho. At some point, I could not keep it down anymore, and they broke off in a freaked out silence…

~ ~ ~

The morning started with the scuffing of mules in the corridor-hall. In a yoke of a waffle tower around my neck, I went out in the heavy *kirza* high boots and, following the mainstream of the traffic, found the washroom and toilet. Then there was a usual *havvage* for breakfast.

When doctors arrived from the city, Tamara looked into the huge corridor and called me, by my last name. I approached her with the apologies for being late on Monday; she generously pardoned me and retired back to her parts.

The corridor-hall society was populous, diversified and in a state of noisy Brownian movement. Absolutely unsystematic... Apart from me, only one individual, with his hair closely cropped in *zek* style, wore high boots. He, for the most part, lay on the floor tiles by the white radiators of central heating installed under the windowsill in the far end of the corridor. Time and again, he was pressing himself against the other patient's backside, who also was lying there. The courting wooer’s advances received a sluggish resistance expressed in reluctant squirms and languid counter pushes.

The mobile part of the crowd roamed around wearing mules, immersed in their individual inner worlds from which they occasionally emerged to issue some incomprehensible exclamations.

A cripple on a low trolley navigated the stream of their wandering legs, propelling himself with hand pushes against the floor tiles. He obviously supervised some part of the society capable of understanding instructions and orders and served the non-static hub for their hangout in the style of a loose black market...

A pair of Messrs. Pretty-Guys kept together. The dark-haired one was selling himself for the master-thief in their milieu of 2.

A young man of Central Asian appearance invited me to play checkers at a table in the far corner. Every eye in his face moved independently from its counterpart as happens when the brain hemispheres do not interfere with the sovereign internal affairs of their neighbor and each one controls their own eye. The guy obviously could not play checkers, and when there remained just one piece of his on the board, I announced the draw and did not play anymore... And I also declined playing cards with the Messrs. Pretty-Guys.

On the other end of the corridor by the window, between the locked door to the courtyard and the glazed door to the passage with medical offices, a white figure of a nurse sat in a chair. She never intervened in anything. She rose from her throne only after the midday *havvage* to stately walk along with the gurney, arriving from the medical staff passage, to the center of the corridor-hall.

"Medications!" sounded joyful yells from different parts of the crowd. They rushed to scramble around the movable table, grabbing up their favorites from the pills of different color and size, scattered over the oil-clothed top. Soon after, some glassy-eyed appeared in the crowd. The exchange transactions at the black market grew more animated...

To pass the time, I followed the example of Lenin and Dean Reed, measuring their cells with steps from end to end. Luckily, I had much more space and orbited the huge corridor in a sweeping ellipse, from the window in one end to the window by the locked door in the other. Being not the only moving body in that space, I carefully avoided collisions, especially since I paced at a rapid rate.

Some in the crowd paid attention. The blonde one from Messrs. Pretty-Guys started up the Indian drums beat against the cover of a thick book, which he constantly kept in his armpit, accentuating the footfalls of my high boots.

"Why are you driving a fool? You need it?" shouted the dark-haired one in my wake.

"Try it yourself, you'll get high!" yelled I back, scudding off to the next apex in the ellipse.

Then one activist in the Brownian movement by the walls suddenly got it. He issued a happy scream and also started running regular ellipses of an orbit, though not along, but across the hall-corridor.

"Ogoltsoff infected Baranov!" squeaked some rat from the crowd to the queen in her chair. But she did not intervene in anything.

Walking was painful, because the right boot, invented for the torture kit of the Inquisition under the name of "Spanish boot", was two sizes smaller than mine. I managed to withstand just one day, and on the following afternoon, I decided that was enough for playing Andersen's Mermaid and turned to the nurse with the complaint. She gave me a pair of regular mules, like on the rest of inmates, only much more rundown, so my orbiting became painless, yet markedly slowed down…

One compromise because of weakness invites another to slip in and before long your adamant determination tumbles in a crumbled heap. I mean, you start to fix one unbearable sore and there crop up a pack of others crying for amelioration... The button in the pajama pants belt kept slipping out of its too wide loop. I grew tired of living with my hand in a constant clutch at the pants top to prevent their falling down. And again, I had to bring the nurse out of her non-involvement lethargy, with the request for a needle and thread.

No sooner had the repair been over than another nurse appeared from the medical staff passage, and called the roll of those starting to Club. My name was there too…

For a considerable stretch, our caravan of 12 in pajamas followed the nurse in white, yet the concluding inmate in our single file wore also a black padded jacket of a workman. On climbing a stair flight, we entered the long indoor gallery bridging to another building. Outside the windows, there unfolded a withered fields with distant black-and-yellow arrow-shields indicating the direction towards the out-of-sight airfield. Each windowsill in the gallery was packed with multiple pots of cacti accompanied by the handwritten instruction for those meek of heart and ignorant of agriculture, "Do not water!"

Inside, Club presented the replica of a regular club with the stage in front of the plywood rows of seats, and the visual-agitation posters on the walls:

Bread is the head of anything else!

The economy should be economical!

interspersed by the sheets of wordier pieces in a smaller typeset.

The workman from the end of our file pulled up at the sheet nearest to the entrance to unswervingly study it, at times scratching the cap on his head, for which purpose he had to unlock his hands from being clasped in *zek* attitude on his back.

I sat down in the last row of seats. The lamps above the stage lit up, and a man in a doctor's smock came out upon it bearing a displeased countenance along with an accordion.

Two more nurses brought in another caravan – a dozen of women in gray gowns over the sturdy linen of hospital underwear. 2 or 3 of them proceeded to seats in the middle of the hall and were immediately joined by Messrs. Pretty-Guys.

The accordionist started to play for the dancers in the passage between the stage and the front row of seats... A woman of about 40 swiftly paced along the central aisle carrying her sweet smile to the last row and invited me for the white dance.

"Sorry, I'm no good at the waltz."

She went away with her face dropped down. A loss. A loss...

Despite the purpose of the Strauss' "The Danube Waves" no one was waltzing but just hugging each other in pairs, a couple of which climbed onto the stage. In one of those elevated pairs, there was the young man with asynchronous eyes. But now both of them were fixed on the tall soft fluff of gray mohair in the knitted hat of his partner – a nurse in a white smock. Who of them invited who?.

The ladies were first to be taken away before our caravan started off. The workman broke away from the same citation poster on the wall and took his concluding place in the file, without ever unclipping his eternal *zek*-styled hand-clasp…

~ ~ ~

Apart from orbiting the corridor and visiting the ball in Club, I also was reading. I asked the blonde one from Messrs. Pretty-Guys to lend me the book from his armpit, which he at times used as a drum, and he willingly concurred. It turned out to be a book of stories by Tamaz Chiladze translated from Georgian. I liked them though in original they, probably, were better.

On the third day, I was sitting by the window next to the locked door to the yard, where the first snow was descending in slow quiet flakes. I watched it while reading *The Judge and Executioner* by Durrenmatt, which I had read years before. Behind me, all the modern world was romping and fussing and rumbling and mumbling and stumbling as reflected in the cross-section by the fifth unit at the fourth kilometer. I was already fed up with it.

Yet, I did not have time to finish reading Durrenmatt read years ago because of the knock on the window pane from outside. On the fluffy thin cover of snow, there stood Eera smiling at me. Silent soft snowflakes swirled slowly about her face. So beautiful…

The nurse brought my clothes and I entered the wardroom to change. Then I returned to the corridor-hall, whose society's particles that retained any close connection with now and here were astounded by my leaving them so soon. Someone, hiding his identity behind the Brownian movement, shouted angrily that it's not right to let me loose, but it certainly was not Baranov because he's a cheerful bozo.

Excited by the freedom at hand, I took a step forward, raised my hand with the fist balled oratorically and shouted out that I was grateful to everyone for everything and promised to remember. In response, a spontaneous rally broke out, but I already stepped out in the medical staff passage. On the way to Tamara's office, in one of the rooms, I caught a glimpse of a lonely old lady in a dressing gown and a head kerchief. Crawling on all fours over the floor, she was lining large blocks, the size of a brick, in two sketchy rows.

Tamara told Eera that my treatment had not started yet but since she was insisting so much then let her take me and not be too worried, the deviations of the sort I had demonstrated so far were a commonplace anomaly among the folks with a PhD degree. That was her way of consoling Eera.

> (...that snare did not work on me though, by that time I had already found an effective trick for keeping any conceit vagaries in check with an iron grip on my supremacy's throat, but Eera seemed to have believed the specialist. In any case, two years later she gave me for the birthday present a book by Plekhanov, that very SOB who brought Marxism to Russia.
>
> On the back of its hardcover, she wished me to become as clever as him because she was waiting for that. So, she waited, at least, two years more, though Freud was talking of just one and a half, at most...)

Addressing me, Tamara prescribed a special means of turning back to myself for which end I had every night to watch the news program "Time".

In the following several years, I dutifully followed her prescription and could already with an accuracy of 3 days predict a plane crash or the arrival of the delegation of the Communist Party of Paraguay in Moscow on a brief working visit. But then I got tired of it and dropped watching TV, justifying myself by the proverb that the humpback would be straightened with only his grave, at which point I also, at last, become like everyone else – clean of my leopard spots.

> (...O, how pleasantly beautiful this world is if you consider it without digging deeper thru its glossy surface!
>
> ***"...the symposium was held under the aegis of UNESCO..."***
>
> What magic, lovely, charming ring resounds in each word of this splendid line!.

But when you get to coarse plain roots where “aegis” means nothing but a goatskin, and "symposium" corresponds to a collective drinking bout, then you cannot but feel bored with the world where nothing ever changes and once again, as always, there is a jag debauchery under the goatskins of prostitute Unesca...)

"See how perfect this world is,

Have a look!

Ah, how pe-e-e-rfect this world i-i-is!.."

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Married Life

SMP-615, aka Construction and Installation Train of the same number, was located about where I once chewed blades of grass, half-starved in the bicycle trip to the river of Seim, only on the other side of the road.

At the time of my grazing experience, Konotop had not reached that place yet, but the city grew and the location became a part of the outskirt neighborhood named "At-Seven-Winds". Konotopers hardly ever lacked propensity to a poetic vision of the world they live in.

On the 7th of December 1979, after a brief stay at the 4th kilometer in the outskirts of Chernigov, I came to SMP-615, because none of the streetcar or bus routes were reaching there, that was as far as hell itself, on the frontier of At-Seven-Winds.

I couldn’t even distantly imagine why in the course of my job interview the head of the personnel department kept giving such warps to his face that would put to shame the amateurish attempts by Slavic Aksyanov. At some point, he even grabbed from his desktop a wide wooden ruler to cover his left eye with it. So as not to jinx me off? Taking a hangover for the distortions' cause would be a weak conjecture, as I came there in the late afternoon. Just one of those things that you'd better dismiss with a shrug, and forget.

Anyway, he provided me with a job at the organization, which as he explained, levied 10 percent of the apartments built by them for subsequent distribution among the workers of SMP-615, whose turn it was the established queue of employees waiting for the improvement of their housing conditions. Currently, the construction of 110-apartment block was underway, with 23 people in the aforesaid queue. Of course, I handed in the application and became the 24th. Even the fact, that after the delivery of the 110-apartment block, I automatically turned the 13th aspirer did not scare me off. Because in the following couple of projects, I would definitely get an apartment for my family. I did not know then that not everything was as straightforward. And the head of the personnel department did not have time to explain to me the details and nuances, because he changed his place of work.

The position was embraced by a retired army officer. With the new head of personnel department, everything was clear and subordinate, since retired Major Petukhov kept his countenance under the army-trained control. However, the facial expressions of the personnel department heads were not of much importance, because the main people in my life for the coming 6 years became the team of bricklayers.

In SMP-615 there was only one team of bricklayers, all the rest – plasterers, welders, carpenters, plumbers came to the erected objects after us. The workforce at the mortar-concrete unit, as well as crane operators, forwarders, and loaders were an auxiliary layer; even the engineers and accountants stayed secondary when compared to us.

It was we, who came to the deep foundation pits to fill them inserting multi-tonnage concrete blocks with the assistance of the truck crane operator Vladimir Gavkalov. And then began the epic of upgrowing the walls and "fillings", aided by the tower crane operators Mykola, Kolya, and Vitalya, in turn. The crane operators replaced each other, welders changed, but we stayed and withstood, for who else, if not we, would transfigure the space?

In place of an air-filled void for the roaming flocks of crows, stair flights marched up, for the tenants to climb to their homes located at the previously unattainable altitudes. The idle crows had to reconsider their flight routes. Of course, multi-apartment houses ensued from the work of all the above listed, as well as of not mentioned SMP-615's structures and units, but we, the bricklayers, were the arrowhead in the advancement towards the realization of the everlasting dream of mankind about normal living conditions.

Being the arrowhead is not an easy job. Neither office walls, nor the cabins' glass, nor the boards of the hulls shelter you from the whims of calamitous weather. All your protection is your *spetzovka*, helmet, and boots, in the winter a pea-jacket, mitts, and a hat will be added, any part of you not protected by them becomes a prey to the scorching sun, whipping rains, ruthless whirlwinds, and merciless frosts. Not everyone will endure, not everyone will stand up to being a bricklayer day after day.

I have worked with lots of different people both in SMP-615 and beyond it, but for me, these 12 will forever remain "our team":

Mykola Khizhnyak – the foreman;

two Peters—Lysoon and Kyrpa—bricklayers;

two Gregories—Gregory Gregoryevich, and his nickname Grynya, handled Melekhov (after the serial of the "Quiet Flows the Don" on the central television)—bricklayers;

two Andreyevnas (not relatives though)— Lyubov Andreyevna and Anna Andreyevna—bricklayers;

Lydda and Vitta — bricklayers;

Vera Sharapova and Katerina — riggers;

Sehryoga Ogoltsoff — a bricklayer.

In the city of Konotop, it's easy to see an apartment block built by our team from the houses built by other organizations because ours were striped. Starting the walls of a floor, we laid the perimeter belt of red brick (6cm x 12cm x 25cm) courses. The mark "KK" on the brick stretcher stood for "Konotop Brick", instead of "Factory" there followed "I", or "II", or "III" indicating the shift when it was produced.

After the belt courses reached the level of window ledges, we switched to laying the pillars between the windows of white silicate bricks (9cm x 12cm x 25cm) of unmarked origin.

The pillars were bridged with concrete cross-pieces delivered up by the tower crane. The completing courses over the cross-pieces were also of red bricks.

Now, looking from aside, another floor was ready (red-white-red), yet not everything goes as swiftly as it happens in a fairy tale… Now, it's time to start the "filling", that is growing up the inner walls – the load-bearing axial one, aka "the capital wall", and the transverse ones partitioning the blocks of adjacent staircase-entrances, as well as one apartment from another within the same block. The partitions between the rooms and corridors in an apartment were laid of gypsum slab-plates (8cm x 40cm x 80cm) laid “on rib”, in shiner position. The toilet-bathroom compartments were also of red bricks (and only red!— because silicate bricks, as well as gypsum, do not withhold moisture) laid on stretch, in the same position.

Only then the floor was ready to be bridged over with the concrete slabs conveyed, one by one, by the tower crane on 4—taut strained by the held weight—steel cables which the riggers, Katerina and Vera Sharapova, hooked them with from the stacks on the ground. Each of slab ends had a pair of iron loops for the hooks, the length of each slab was 5.6 meters, but the width might vary from 1 to 1.2 meters.

The difference in slab width was dictated by the need to fit them accurately between the staircase-entrances because a slab should not overlap and block the kitchen and toilet ventilation ducts laid out inside the staircase-entrance walls. And if the slabs brought to the site all happened to be of the same widths?

> (...the era of planned economy and deficits taught not to be too picky and grab just what turns up, while at least that was available...)

What if there was nothing to choose from in the slab stacks crowding about the site, eh?

Not a problem whatsoever! There was a breaker, a sledgehammer, two Peters, two Gregories, one Sehryoga and foreman Mykola – passing the tools to each other, they would bring the slab to the needed gauge dimensions.

Bridging the floor is a crucial moment, my first year on the team I was not honored with that responsibility.

The crane carefully downs the brought slab onto two load-bearing walls: the outer and the axial (capital) ones, to span the two of them. The foreman together with a trusted bricklayer lie down with their stomachs across the bridging slab and hang their heads below its underbelly, checking how well it fits in the series of the previously installed ones because the slabs' concrete underbellies become the ceiling in the would-be apartment. If needed, the crane would take the slab up and aside, for the mortar to be added onto a wall, or maybe scraped off. After all, we built for people who would come to live there!

Finally, the exacting peeps of 2 hanging heads feel satisfied by how it flushes with the entire evenness in the previously installed bridging, and the foreman cries out the long-awaited for words: "They'll lap it up!" Which means the future tenants would be happy with the quality of the construction works in their respective homes.

The crane loosens the taut cables, the hooks get released from the loop-holes at both ends of the installed slab and dropped clang-whang onto its concrete upper rim. The crane jib goes up and turns aside, the 4 steel slings with weighty hooks at their ends—the so-called "spider"—swim thru the air in the ascension movement. Jerking, thru the rumble and din, the iron carcass of its open-work tower, the crane rolls off along the track of rails run to the slab stack on top of which Katerina and Vera Sharapova are waiting ready to stick the "spider's" hooks thru the loops in the next slab's end-holes. The technology proved and founded on decades upon decades of implementation…

~ ~ ~

In the morning at half-past seven, the workforce of SMP-615 gathered at the station square, waiting for their colleagues, arriving by the first local train thru Bakhmuch, Khalimonovo, Khutor Khalimonovo and Kukolka stations, to come up in the waves of other passengers bypassing the corner of the mighty two-story structure of the Konotop railway station. And then, all together, we started to wait for our bus.

We formed a wide circle, not for a dance but to idle the time sharing the news, fresh jokes or looking around to make comments on the not too exuberant life in the station square. There was practically no traffic on it and only other circles from other organizations, yet ours was the widest and jolliest.

> (...in a circle, there is something of a family feel, incipient rudiments of a community. In a circle you see more human faces than when standing in the lined-up ranks...)

Finally, from Club Street there appeared our bus, our Seagull, handled so after the cars of Seagull make transporting delegations of foreign governments from the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow to the Kremlin. It cautiously crossed the streetcar tracks and passed the one-story building of the railway militia station by the corner of the square, then under the cabstand sign on the lamp pillar, though, for some reason, no taxi ever appeared under it. At the end of its slow

triumphal circling the square, the bus stopped next to our merry circle to slam its automatic doors open.

From the square, it took us past Loony, past School 12, past the streetcar Depot, to At-Seven-Winds, where our team got off near the 110-apartment block site, and the bus went farther, for another half-kilometer or so, taking the rest of its passengers to the vast grounds of SMP-615 behind the narrow wall of white brick. However, not all of our team workers came by the Seagull, most of them lived in the 50-apartment block or in the hostel barracks, also in At-Seven-Winds, and they arrived on foot.

We changed clothes in the wheelless timber trailer painted brown. About half of its tiny vestibule was crammed with dead-mortar crusted shovels leaned against the wall, over the bunch of well-dented tin pails out of which stuck the handles of our trowels and brick hammers out and hung the coiling fishing-line tails of our plumb bobs. The inner door of the vestibule opened to a low room with one window over the long well-scarred table and a bench to it and two sets of narrow lockers in its both ends. Most of the room was filled with the huge box of asbestos-cement plates covering electric innards of the heater below the frame welded of rebar-rods to throw our padded jackets over it for drying after rain. Yet, the box could also be used for sitting and even stretching over it.

The women of the team doffed and donned in the oversees' trailer. Unlike ours, it had big wheels which called for the steep porch way under the door in the middle of its side wall. The oversees' trailer was tin-coated and had two windows because there were two compartments in it – one for the current oversee and heaps of the blueprint drawings of the project in progress, and the other for our team women.

At night, two pensioner-watchmen slept, alternately, night in, night out, in the oversees' compartment. One of them, by the brave name of Rogov, wore a Pe-Sha tunic with order-and-medal straps, an officer's belt, riding breeches and high boots of chrome leather, and on his head a khaki cloth cap in the fashion of the 1930's, like that worn by Marshal Zhukov when he was still a brigade commander. From under the long cloth visor, there looked the face of a veteran Roman legionary, worn out in campaigns against various barbarian tribes and full of resentment at the head of Konotop pension fund. That sentiment took roots because of the comment, accidentally overheard by Rogov on a visit to the fund office, by which the aforesaid public servant consoled his deputy, exasperated at the stalwart bearing of the veteran. "Patience, colleague, they're already not so too many around."

The second watchman preferred civilian clothes, but earlier in his career, he wore the uniform of a militiaman and subjected tipsy mujiks to self-invented sadistic check: those still capable of articulating "Jawaharlal Nehru" were let go, while the phonetically hopeless ones transported to the sobering-up station.

> (...Konotop is Konotop, where even a mere rank-and-file militiaman knew and popularized the name of the first president of India...)

When on his turn, the former militiaman sealed the window in the oversees' compartment from within with a self-made cardboard trencher. Otherwise, he could not sleep at all because of his service, as a young man, in the troops fighting Bandera resistance, and the windows in their barracks were closed for the night with lumber shields so that the repose of servicemen would not be disturbed by the guerrillas' grenades hurled thru the window panes…

After donning their *spetzovka* robes, the entire team collected in the men bricklayers' trailer to exchange the news about At-Seven-Winds, the hostel barracks, and SMP-615 itself. Yes, sometimes Gregory Gregoryevich would start bulldozing Grynya that at 8.00 he should stand at the line, chink his trowel and lay a brick upon another. To which Grynya would produce a grunting chortle and readily agree, "Very truly!" Because until the mortar was brought to the site and crane-hauled to the line, the bricklayers had nothing to do up there.

The mortar was brought to the site by a dump truck. It would reverse over the rows of empty sheet-iron boxes, and raise its dump for the mortar to crawl down the steep slope, but it would not drop into the boxes completely. And it's good news if at least half of it had slid out off the dump. Firstly, on the way from the mortar-concrete unit, the mortar had grown dense, squeezing water out from the slush, and it was, for the most part, that very water to fall down into the boxes on the ground. And secondly, the dump floor and sides were not smooth anymore but covered with the ever-growing crust of frozen, upon frozen, upon frozen, mortar from the previous deliveries in winter, or of the dried up, upon dried up, upon dried up, rind in summer. That's why it's necessary to climb the tailgate hanging off behind the dump. It would swing in its hinges under your feet so one of them should be propped against the up-tilted dump's side for stability.

Now, you’re in the position to cut the impacted mortar with your shovel and send swaths of it down onto the heap growing over the boxes. When a cut-off layer of mortar pours in the boxes, the truck dump will give a vigorous jerk-and-quake, getting relieved of the load, at this point, keeping your balance on the tailgate is of vital importance.

The dump truck would go, leaving behind a hillock of mortar over 4 to 5 boxes. But that's wrong because each bricklayer is supposed to have a separate box. Katerina and Vera Sharapova would restore the just distribution with their shovels.

Although each box had 4 hook-loops atop its sides, the riggers hooked the boxes by only 2, diagonally, so that the crane would haul the mortar for 2 bricklayers in 1 go...

The part of wall in the process of being laid by the team was called "the seizure". A string, aka the *shnoorka*, was tightly stretched from end to end of the seizure. Usually, *shnoorka* was a thick fishing line smeared with stuck, dried up, mortar, the knots in its length marked places where a strike of an incautious trowel had cut it up, giving rise to reproving exclamations from along the seizure, "Again? What son of a bitch was it?!." The *shnoorka* served for maintaining the right direction and horizontal leveling of the brick courses so everyone paid it close attention...

To the right of a bricklayer, the crane left a box, aka *banka*, full of mortar. The boxful of mortar was not exceedingly large – just about a quarter of one ton. When the *banka*-box got emptied, the crane took it off to the riggers for refilling from the remaining or newly brought heap of

mortar. The boxed mortar gradually lost its elasticity but then you had to simply add water fetched in a crumpled pail from the multi-ton container standing nearby, behind the seizure, and temper the “dirt” applying your shovel. That's why a shovel handle stuck out from each box. However, the main purpose of the shovel was to put the mortar from the box onto your part in the seizure. Then the shovel returned to its stuck up posture in the box, and the mortar dumped onto the wall was spread by the bricklayer using their trowel, a tool approximately the size of a large kitchen knife with a triangular spade substituting for the blade.

To the left from a bricklayer, there stood a pallet of bricks, 3 to 4 hundred pieces stacked in dense rows on top of each other. Snatching a brick from the upper row, the bricklayer laid it upon the spread mortar and tap-tapped with the tin-clad end of the trowel handle, so as to level the brick to the line dictated by the stretched *shnoorka*.

When the course bond called for a brick of special size—a half, a three-quarter, or (the smallest) a one-fourth piece—the bricklayer's hammer was used to gauge the brick by cutting off the excess. After the bricks on the pallet were finished off, the crane operator delivered another one, hooked by Katerina and Vera Sharapova from among the pallets stacked on the ground.

The rhythmic change of interlinked movements—stooping, stretching, turning, bending—transformed the labor process, taking into account its outdoor nature, into a real aerobics sprinkled with a weeny admixture of weightlifting. Looped, consistently ordered, motion, which you might even call spiraling. Do you follow?

And now spit in the eye of that pathetic bullshit and forget it, because the construction site is not a circus with evenly smoothed sand in its arena. Construction site is a danger zone, where spiky ends of rebar-rods lurk in dark nooks, a seemingly firm board snaps off under your foot, a pail of boiling tar falls from the roof, and you’re a lucky devil if the warning yell "run!" makes you jump aside without needless gaping skyward: what's up? Flump!!

It is the place, where a cast-iron heating radiator hits the ground by the wall, hurled from a window on the fourth floor by a criminal having recently returned from his another stretch in Zona. He was not targeting anyone personally and threw it just so, without ever looking out to check who might have their pate cracked open by God’s will.

On the whole, a construction site could be compared to life itself, and there, just as in life, one must not only live but also survive. (Excuse my recidivistic falling back into the rut of pathos.)

Still, it's worth mentioning that bricklayers are not robots but mere humans. And humans, when being cornered properly enough, would take your dear life to save the life of theirs... That is...er...what was it I was about?. Ah, yes!. Construction site.

At a construction site, there's no time for a bricklayer to glide thru whimsical interpretations of esoteric messages from the initiated to the chosen, neither for the deciphering of signs drawn in the sky by ever-changing clouds. Wait for a smoke break, and then play with your irrelevant or over-insightful thoughts, shuffle the puzzle-pieces of signs and symbols of varying significance to your heart's content, read and learn the crypt-glyph messages written with white on blue. Until

Mykola the foreman had risen the *shnoorka* for the next course and yelled along the seizure line: "Off we drive!" To which call Peter Lysoon would respond despondently: "What? Again to attack? And which way lies your "forward"? And that is the signal to grab your shovel, splat dirt atop the wall in progress, and start to live on further...

~ ~ ~

> (...a couple of centuries before, on the border with England, or maybe conversely, with Scotland, there lived a farmer earning plenty of dough without any charlatanism whatsoever. His specialty was restoring all kinds of mentally touched, crazed, shifted and otherwise impaired. On the condition, that their loving relatives were not around in the course treatment.
>
> So, they brought to him such a, let's say, challenged, whose specific perception of the world around had already f-f..er..I mean, fretted brains of all of his household members unfit in earnest consider him a teapot. "Oh, look out! I'm of porcelain! Don't break me up!"
>
> And the following morning the farmer would take the teapot out into the field, together with odd items from other services—crystal highballs, or saltcellars with their lids lost, as well as costume jewelry, which also turned up at times—and carefully harnessed the whole jingling company into the plow. And then, naturally, plowed the field.
>
> By the evening of the day, 88 percent of the glass containers recollected their origin, starting to voice comments and protestations to his erroneous attitude towards human beings. On the second day, the most obstinate pressure cookers also began to pretend being human as everybody else, and the farmer returned to the family and society their fully restored members. For the stipulated fee, of course, plus bonus of the field cultivated by unpaid workforce...)

Eera did not believe in labor therapy in the open, she had more trust in folkloric remedies. That winter she took me to the sorcerer in the district center of Ichnya, in the Chernigov region. We arrived there late in the evening amid the early thickening winter twilight. There was about half-hour before the bus departure back, and the local kids, with some kind of pride, directed us to the sorcerer's *khutta*.

The door was opened by a regular rural woman of middle age and the rest of the interior was as ordinary, strapped of any hexerei. In the kitchen, there was a pair of visitors, but not from our bus, I would have remembered them. Probably, from somewhere in the neighborhood. A young couple they were, seemingly newlywed, both seated at the table with the man busy shoving away a bowlful of borsch, and she, like, overseeing. Not quite the right time for borsch though, but I did not intervene – might be the sorcerer prescribed it in the way of medication...

The woman led Eera to the next room, and two minutes later they came back together with the sorcerer, a black-haired man about 50 in a khaki shirt from the army parade-crap. We looked at

each other, unblinkingly, and he returned to his room with Eera. I stayed with the borsch-eater and the 2 women.

Soon Eera came back, all excitedly wound up, and we left for the bus. On our way to Nezhyn, Eera shared that I was the way I was because they had fed a "giving" to me, and there occurred an overdose, but it was useless to treat me on that particular day since it was a wrong "quarter", that is the moon was not in the right phase. (Or could they run out of the borsch?.)

The sorcerer also said that I did not need to come on a visit anymore, and should be replaced with someone from my blood relatives. Later, instead of me, my sister Natasha a couple of times went with Eera to the district center of Ichnya.

> (...it's a commonplace knowledge that a "giving" is a love potion used by a female to make you fall in love with her. The target of the charm is treated to something edible spiced, for the purpose, with a portion of her menstrual humors.
>
> Anyway, it was the fair sex to start experiments on human beings...)

I have no trust in any charms, neither in spells, nor in any other hooey of the kind, but when you chink your trowel against brick or turn the mortar with the shovel, your head remains, basically, free and lots of things may slowly twirl in there.

> (...if, purely hypothetically, suppose that the "giving" has, after all, taken place, then – who, where, when?
>
> I am not sure in which from the years of my work at SMP-615, two assumptions turned up in my head:
>
> 1. the kefir, which Maria brought for me when I was treated in Nezhyn city hospital for the principle's sake;
>
> 2. the boiled sausage I was treated to by my course-mate Valya with black eyebrows meeting on her nose bridge, during our joint school practice at the station of Nosovka, although I was not really hungry.
>
> However, since I had not fallen in love with either of them, the hypothesis fails miserably, the Ichnya sorcerer gets zero points and remains on the bench of charlatans...)

~ ~ ~

When Gaina Mikhailovna, keeping her eyes aside, cautiously asked what attitude was entertained towards me among our team members, I got it easily what wind she was trimming her sails to. That was meant to ask: how do they tolerate my drenched reputation?

Yes, it should be admitted that not every collective would readily swallow presence in its ranks of someone with higher education at a position not corresponding to their diploma. Here lies the explanation to that scream from the bottom of the heart of Vasya, a roof-fastener at the "Dophinovka" mine, "Your diploma's a sore disgrace for our enterprise!" which stood for, "You turn the mine into some worthless rabble!"…

My reputation at SMP-615 was spoiled by the cashier Komos who knew that I had studied in Nezhyn and got the diploma. Her daughter Alla once had a long, serious, relationship with my brother Sasha. At that period, I even visited the Komoses one time in their apartment. But later, Alla cut her marvelous long hair way too short, and my brother became the Adoptee to Lyouda and her mother…

The cashier Komos was meting out wages to the employees at SMP-615. For that event, once a month our Seagull bus was taking the workers from the construction sites to the SMP-615 base grounds, and in the lobby on the first floor of the administrative building, we lined to the small square loophole in the wall.

You got your payment after standing in the anticipatory excited line of workmen, then drooping forward to thrust your head into the opening of the loophole-window, low in the wall, and signing the pay-sheet... I just did not like that final juxtaposition. With your head somewhere there, not quite clear where, your behind stayed outside to the mercy and at the discretion of the line in a state of heated agitation…

When I reached the window, I did not stoop but simply pulled the sheet closer—on the window ledge—and signed it. Moreover, Komos saw that it was I who popped up. Then she cried out from behind the glass, "Sehryozha! And where is the head?"

"I was guillotined."

"What? Don't show off! Having a diploma does not make you above anything else! You once visited us with your Olga. Forgot that? We have been drinking hooch together!."

Never was I in favor of frivolous smugness nor of brusque familiarity. And, naturally, my response to Komos, the cashier, was direct enough to put her in a proper shape of attitude: "Missed by a mile!" said I, "There was no hooch whatsoever! That time at your place, we drank plain medical alcohol and flushed it down with birch sap."

So, in general, I let her know where she belonged. But she still gave me my payment, and there was enough to return Tonya those 25 rubles that she lent me for flowers, when you were some ten-minute old at the maternal hospital. Till then, it somehow did not work out at all to square up with her…

Thus, because of the talkative cheek of a cashier, I never managed to hide from our team the fact of my diploma. However, they did not apply any specific discrimination on the grounds of my having it, and after about 4 years I even screwed up on my *spetzovka* jacket the "float-badge", of those that they handed out along with the diploma. I just thought: why should it kick back in the

hutch drawer? That’s how it got screwed up, in the summertime, naturally. And my *spetzovka* jacket acquired pretty spiffy look with that rhomboid enamel badge of tender blue and a golden book spread open inside it against the backdrop of the sun-bleached black cotton of my protective clothing.

For more than a month I walked around the site wearing it. And then one morning I opened the locker where my *spetzovka* hung in its place but the badge was whipped, only the hole pricked for its screw remained in the jacket breast. But it couldn’t be someone from our team, who unscrewed the insignia, no, at that moment the project neared its commissioning and the site swarmed with workforce driven in even from outside SMP-615 because of the solidarity of managerial suckers…

So, on my next visit to Nezhyn, I gave my mother-in-law a quite predictable answer, "Gaina Mikhailovna, 10 people from our team have a good attitude to me, and 1 person entertains a positive one."

"How do you know?"

"I conducted an oral survey. Separately, of course."

"Does it mean that you asked, 'What's your attitude to me?'"

> (...an interesting question, eh? Where else could I get those data from?
>
> By the way, one of the respondents also asked in their turn, "And what's your attitude to me?"...)

Yes, life turned upside down: once I used to go from Nezhyn to Konotop on weekends, but now from Konotop to Nezhyn. On Fridays by 17.40 local train to Nezhyn; on Mondays back from there by 6.00 local train. 3 times I overslept that 6.00 local and began returning by 19.30 on Sundays because I got into a flap to deteriorate my positioning in the line for getting an apartment.

> (...when there was the Negro slavery in America, a number of the Afro-American families got split. Say, the husband was slavering on the plantation of one master and his wife was several miles away on the plantation of another one. On holidays, her husband was visiting her. Such a woman was called his "broad wife".
>
> When I learned that, I regretted that I knew English at all, so deeply the term scratched me, I don't know why, but I got really upset...)

Because there were no streetcars in Nezhyn, the city buses grew too aloof. The tin plates on special posts at every bus stop were telling, with black on yellow, at what exactly time bus number this or that should pull up by, but reading those plates would only aggravate frustration. According to the tin-table, no less than 3 of Bus 5 should have already passed the stop, while you

were still waiting for at least a single one... At last! It appeared in the distance instilling a timid hope that... No, it revved by, ignoring the stop because of being jam-packed to the utmost…

However, that night Eera and I were lucky. The moment we reached the bus stop, it was approached by a bus. It was a Saturday night and we walked out because Twoic invited me to play Preferans at his place. He was already a last-year student and did not live in the hostel but rented a flat somewhere, so we arranged to meet in the main square. From Red Partisans Street to the main square there were just 2 bus stops, and we would go on foot but for that bus turned up. Eera would hold on to my arm, so as not to slip in her high-wedge high boots on the firmly trampled snow with rigid circles of white on it drawn by the cones of light beneath the lamp pillars...

When we were dressing in the bedroom, Eera asked me to pass her the belt from her frock – a long strap of fabric. Because the bedroom was so narrow and to skip squeezing between the bed and your carriage, I just threw the belt to her. However, one of its ends I kept pinched with my fingers, in case she did not catch it. Eera, not following my actions after her request, bent forward to zip up her high boots, and the other end of the belt swept over her drooping back.

I was stunned by the striking resemblance of the situation to that scene in "The Gypsy" movie, where Budulie lashed his wife with a whip for goodbye because he was going away to the war, like, gypsies had that sort of tradition. However, Eera had not noticed anything, and I consoled myself with the thought that I was not a gypsy and there was no war anyway…

When the bus pulled up at the stop in the square, there had already accumulated such a crowd that even 2 buses would not be enough. I got off first and stretched out my hand to Eera, helping her to descend. No sooner had she been on the stop than the crowd rushed to storm the bus doors. However, I managed to fence Eera behind my back. And then some girl shrieked loudly because she got almost run over in the stampede. Fortunately, she managed to grab onto the bus side and was not trampled by the crowd pouring up the steps.

As a man not only noble but also gallant, I thought it was absolutely wrong, especially in the presence of my wife, and I shouted to the girl, over the mass streaming between us, apologizing for all that bedlam, "I am sorry!"

Someone in the crowd did not want to be inferior in gallantry to me and, deducting it was I who pushed her, hit me on the cheekbone. Or, maybe, he'd been schooled that a fact of violation must be followed by the fact of punishment.

And then I declared out loud to him and to the crowd which for a moment forgot about the bus and tarried waiting for my response, and even the full moon seemed to turn her face closer to hear the words: "With all my nonresistance this is too much to bear!" And the blow was answered with my blow.

Probably, he was not alone there, or else the guys, united by the frustration from a long wait in the embittered crowd, immediately turned into a close-knit pack but there poured blows at me from all the sides – they found a scapegoat to splash out their rage kindled by inconveniences in

life design. All I could do was to cover my face and head with my arms bent at elbows but, in my humble opinion, the self-protection attitude was executed by my body on its own accord, without waiting for my decisions. I, personally, could only hear some unintelligible yells. Who to whom? What about?

When there sounded the growl of the started engine, I somehow was already in the square, off the stop, in the cross-light of the street lamps bounding the place, but still keeping on my feet, although bareheaded. Probably, the wrath-spillers were too many, and they hindered each other to knock me down flat on the trodden snow crust. The pack ran off to catch the door from slamming on the other side of the bus. It left and I returned to the stop where, among a dozen passengers who had not managed to squeeze in, Eera stood with my rabbit fur hat in her hands. Farther aside, in the shadow of the dark news stall there loomed Twoic who had come to meet us…

He led us to his flat which he rented together with Petyunya Rafalofsky, and I played one pool with them there. Then they went out to see off Eera and me. The narrow sidewalk allowed for only two persons to go side by side, and Eera was in the first couple walking along with Twoic. He wore a long sheepskin coat and a furry *malakhai* headgear giving him a look of a bear next to Eera in her coat of straight cut and a closely fitting woolen hat.

I was walking behind them, alongside Petyunya, and felt unbearable bitterness because she was not with me. Yet, what else could I do? To kick up a scene of jealousy? To pull her away from the Twoic's side? Then who was I? Hooey-Pricker in the demi-saison coat from Alesha Ocheret, freshly from under the kicking herd in the square. No one would want to walk with such a wretch by her side, even if she were your own wife. In the skirmish an hour ago, I was not hurt too bad but how painful it was to walk coupled with Petyunya now!

He and Twoic saw us to the square, and then still farther, down the street to the bridge by the hostel, where we finally managed to part. For a goodbye, Twoic, averting his look away from me and taking deep often swallows from his cigarette, expounded on his having a sex recently with one of his Bio-Fac sluts, how she embraced his waist with her legs, while he was dragging her around the room holding up by the grip at her tits. That gross self-advertising of a male winner utterly shocked me. I'd never share shit of that kind in presence of even those sluts of his. Some f-f..er..filthy mudak.

When we walked on towards Red Partisans, Eera never put her hand on to my arm, and she kept silent. I just had to shut up as well. Some emprises are certainly not worth it, like begging pardon of stranger girls…

~ ~ ~

The management of SMP-615 found a way to, at least partially, smooth out the fact of keeping around a bricklayer with a diploma. I was appointed one of the Assessors at the Comradely Court.

Such courts considered minor, insignificant misdoings, offenses not addressed in the articles of the criminal code or, if envisaged there, not bearing excessively grave nature, like, some petty vandalism or, say, theft of trifles. The Comradely Court was rather a means of moral upbraiding than a punishment dealt with all the legislative rigor.

The position of a Comradely Court Assessor provided no payment and was electable by vote. However, it's not always possible to draw a clear borderline between election and appointment. The words "Who's for?" during the voting at trade-union meetings was not a question addressed to those present but rather the drilled-in command, kinda sounding the bugle to signal it was time to raise their hands. That unanimous show of hands might serve an illustrious demonstration of a secondary reflex, no less indicative, but not as repulsive, as the use of a Pavlovian dog dropping saliva thru the glass tube.

The very same responsive reflexology ruled at Komsomol meetings. Actually, thru all the years of my work at SMP-615, there occurred just one such meeting caused by an unexpected visit of an inspector from the City Komsomol Committee. It's highly unlikely that he came to the assembly hall on the second floor of the SMP-615 administrative building on his own accord, he sooner was charged to check how high the life was running among enthusiastic youth under the age of 28 engaged in the construction sphere.

So our Seagull made an extra round to bring us to the base, yet knowing there was no pay awaiting there diminished our enthusiasm usual for the rides at this time of day. The pitiful lack of the puniest interest even in the most pressing issues of our time demonstrated by the busload of us brought to sit thru the meeting, which rolled, with catastrophic swiftness, to its end, filled the cadre with bitter indignation which made him forget the rut of protocol and ask another question, both stinging and exotic, "How could you be so passive?"

At so unfamiliar sounds the folks simply did not know what to do with their hands, that’s why I had to get up and respond rhetorically, "And who, I wonder with your kind permission, would the active lead if there were no acquiescent passives, eh?" Still and all, that f-f..er..I mean, forlorn diploma keeps you obliged to follow a certain line of conduct.

The inspecting functionary was unprepared, in his turn, for such a counter-question, and the meeting got safely closed…

So, the SMP-615 management decided they would show a proper respect to the system of higher education in our state by making me, a carrier of a diploma for such an education, an Assessor of the Comradely Court which required one Chairman and two Assessors for the period of one year, until the next report-and-election meeting of the trade-union.

At the Assessor position, I discovered a latent tyrant lurking inside me, who used to come up with suggestions of the most draconian punishments. For example, a month of solitary (sic!) correctional labor for the plasterer Trepetilikha, in the northern, far-off parts of the SMP-615 grounds. Whereas, for her, a day was lost, if at the bus ride from the station to At-Seven-Winds she would not yackety-yak a couple of colleagues to coma.

Of course, from the SMP-615 production building (the place of the supposed correctional labor) to the check-entrance house by the gate, there was a distance of merely 200 meters, and the check-entrance house was the seat of Svaitsikha the watchwoman, whose tongue was also in no need of oiling. However, the court did not heed my proposal and sentenced Trepetilikha to be removed for 3 months from the position of straw boss in the plasterers' team, which meant the cut in payment to the amount of 10 rubles for each penalty month. Anyway, she got off lightly because her offense could easily have a political resonance.

The trial revealed the following chain of events:

Trepetilikha peeked out of a window in 110-apartment block and saw that the accountant of SMP-615 was going home.

Well, and why not go? She lived in the At-Seven-Winds area, and it took her about 15 minutes of a leisurely stroll to get home from the SMP-615 administrative building. And the time was already twenty to five. Her gross mistake was in answering the question of Trepetilikha who drooped out of the window, "Well, well, and what's there to be carried?" The plasterer meant the cellophane packet in the hands of the passer-by.

"Fish," responded the dimwit of an accountant.

The word "fish" served the detonator for what followed. Trepetilikha went to pieces, collected the women of her plasterers' team and, with prolonged intonations, informed them on the unfair distribution of life's good things, despite the era of developed socialism, "They're sitting there in the offices! Made themselves warm and cozy! An electric heater under each bitch's asshole! And we a getting stiff from cold! And when it's fish, it's for them?! Enough, girlfriends! Collect your spats and hawks! Yes, and even so brazenly she mouthed, 'It's fish I've got.' But do we have no families?!"

The fact is that our Seagull bus at times brought food from ORS, aka the Department for Workingmen Provision. Once, when we were on the 110-apartment block, they brought fresh buns, and on the 100-apartment block, it was mineral water in glass bottles of 0.5 liters.

When and what was meted out in the administrative building of SMP-615, I had no idea, but the following day the women on Trepetilikha's team did not start working and that, from whichever viewpoint, was a strike.

I never knew whether they had brought them fish or some other equivalent, but the finishing work was, after all, continued and Trepetilikha stood before the court. That is, our Comradely Court. The SMP-615 management could not turn a blind eye to the fact of idle time with a political lining to it, especially when the deputy chief technologist wore a tie with the imprinted sickle and hammer. Which says a lot. Yes, my cloth scarf bore a pattern of Kremlin tower on top of the five Olympic Rings and the inscription "Moscow-80", but I had nothing to choose from, while the neckties at the Department Store were fairly diversified with crisscrossed, striped, and even dotted pattern…

On a mature contemplation, it can’t but be admitted that rejecting my proposal to transfer Trepetilikha to the SMP-615 base, the Comradely Court made a wise decision. Keeping her there would tantamount to playing with an open fire atop of a powder keg. Had they brought there something of which she did not get a share, she'd blow up the whole base.

"There are certain women in the settlements of Russia..."

Without false modesty, I have to note that in the villages of the Konotop district one might come across even more cool females whose potential could only be measured in megatons or even by the Richter scale.

"Phui! What brazen folks I have to get along with! The whole of the village was out to hassle me! I’ve barely managed to bark them off!"

And the welder Volodya Shevtsov would even get exiled, had the court played along with my suggestion.

He was a very professional welder who had worked for 20 years at the KEMZ Plant, and there was some kind of hereditary intelligence about him. Maybe, that's why he was drinking like a fish.

When looking at his crisp curly hair, I somehow had associations with the City on the Neva. There was some intelligentsia flair in Volodya... elusive feel of the white nights in Pete-Town... subtle allusion to the Peterhof fountains… But he got tanked up like any other boozer, especially on paydays.

At the court session, the Chairman described the case as follows, "We get off in the station square after work and, by reaching the next from there traffic-lights, Volodya manages to get plastered in full."

Well, it was he who slept – from the station to the traffic-lights by the Under-Overpass there were 2 delis plus the Rendezvous bar in the station square.

At that point, I suggested deporting Volodya to some countryside where there were no traffic-lights tempting simple innocent souls by their unhealthy satanic wink, which would take away the reason for Volodya to booze until he's steaming.

The court rejected such inhumanity, and Volodya himself took offense at me, without emphasizing the sentiment though. And that's a pity, I did miss his classy refinement, "If you would like to go and fuck yourself, please?" at which splendidly worded suggestion, you felt the refreshing gust of breeze from the seafront of our Cultural Capital…

SMP-615 was based in Konotop, but it had several branches operating at other places: a pair of jacks in Kiev, a construction team plus a truck crane in Bakhmuch, a team with a BELARUS tractor in Vorozhba... The third case was that of the overseer at the Bakhmuch branch. They finished somewhat building there and were leveling the adjacent area with a bulldozer borrowed from a local organization. The overseer noticed that a pile of the moved earth was about to bury a defective bridging slab left over after the project completion. So he took the slab into the yard of his friend or, maybe, relative to cover the earth-cellar pit. The building was safely delivered, and then some rat reported a plunder of the socialist property.

At that court session, I had only one question for the criminal, "What would happen to the cracked slab had it not be taken to cover the earth-cellar?"

He gave a discontented shrug and replied, "Would get buried in the ground. What else?"

I demanded to declare public gratitude to the overseer for his contribution to raising the general welfare of the Soviet people. It did not matter who was whose relative, but all of us were one united family.

Due to the general monotony of life, that proposal was also neglected... At the next year's report-election trade-union meeting, no one mentioned my name for election to the Comradely Court. As if I had never had that f-f..er..I mean, fully worked off diploma in my life…

~ ~ ~

After you turned one year old you came on a visit to Konotop, briefly though, for a week or 2. That summer there were frequent thunderstorms. After one of them, I drove you for a spin in your carriage. My mother and Eera were against it, but I did not want to sit in the house and wait for the next teeming rainfall. Finally, Eera conceded for our going out, and they went back to sleep, people grow sleepy in the rain.

There were lots of huge puddles all over the road, but you and I still managed to make a roundabout over almost all of the drenched empty Settlement – from the streetcar terminal to Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street, and back along Professions Street. You were adequately dressed and sleeping under the buckled apron and the raised top of the carriage. Only at the end of Professions Street, when the rubber tire fell off the right front wheel, you woke and sat up, and grabbed the tire which I had placed over the buckled apron.

You grabbed it with your both hands as if it was a steering wheel, but I took away that wet and muddy piece of rubber. You whimpered a little, then hushed but never went to sleep again. Decemberists Street was not far away already, and we reached there on just the hind wheel pair in the carriage…

Then the weather cleared up and in a couple of days I took you out to the field near the streetcar terminal. There I got you out of the carriage and put on the green grass. You were not too firm on your legs yet and just stood with your hand leaning against the carriage side.

I lay down in the grass nearby. The green field slanted upward into the blue sky, and larks were singing from up there. So loud, joyful. You stood there until your red pantyhose showed a dark patch of moisture. I had to take you back home because pampers had not been invented yet…

Another time I took a spare pantyhose along with us and drove you to the pond by the Approvals village, which Kuba and I had been visiting on our bicycles. It's not too far, 5 kilometers or so. You slept all the way.

The pond by Shapovalovka was rather big. I placed the carriage on a low sandy beach to watch your reaction to an unfamiliar world because you had not seen any ponds yet, it was like the first walk-out from a spaceship to an unknown planet.

You woke and sat up, left on your own with something you've never seen in your lifetime. I stood behind the raised top, so as not to interfere with the first impressions.

You turned to the left—only the wide water surface was seen from your viewpoint—then to the right, there was just the same incomprehensible substance, and you burst into tears. Of course! Waking up in the middle of who knows what and all alone. I had to show up and soothe you before we rolled back….

The clothesline under the load of already dry washing stretched from the wicket at 13 Decemberists to the front porch. On the way, it passed above you sitting in your carriage. My mother stood next to it with the basin in her hands to collect the dried things. Suddenly, you gripped on something hanging alongside, rose and stood up in the carriage at all your height.

My mother told me to remove the baby and you, like, responding, threw both your hands up, as if in a dance, as if to say, “See how big I am! I can do what I want!”

And then thru my mother's eyes, there flicked something so dark and eerie that I instinctively pulled you back. Rather, I pulled the handle of the carriage and, by that move, I yanked its bottom from under your feet. You tumbled over the carriage side onto the ground. The spot was, luckily, soft soil and you, fortunately, landed on your back.

Instantly, I picked you wailing at the top of your lungs, but Eera was already darting from the garden in panther leaps to pound her fists against my head and the shoulders because my hands were busy holding you…

The local train taking you back to Nezhyn was overcrowded with the passengers standing in the aisle as one thick mass as well as in the space separating the bench-seats that abut the car walls between the windows. When I had to take your plastic potty to the toilet in the car vestibule, I kept it over my head like a waiter his tray in a crowded tavern...

> (...in my memory, I keep two sets of images which can be easily retrieved and considered in detail. The first set is a collection of apocalyptic impressions, full of howling darkness, crowds in panicky stampede, cold horror.

The second one contains nice, heart-warming pics but they arouse poignant longing for something unreachable, or underachieved. Like that view thru the open door on the bus pulled up nearby Vapnyarka, next to a lean concrete post bearing a blue tin square at its top numbered 379, and behind it there opens a narrow gap for a country road in between the walls of ripening wheat halted immovable, as well as a boy of ten by the roadside post, his hand aloft over his wheat-color-haired head to wave goodbye to the departing bus...

I mean, all those mental slides with you in them are from the second set...)

~ ~ ~

After coming back from Odessa, I lived in a never-ceasing fit of panic, in agonizing fear of what, sooner or later, had to happen or, maybe, had already come to pass. The fear was fueled by jealousy and resentment at not some specific one, but at his taking my Eera from me. The excruciating dread was kept deep hidden as some shameful want, but no camouflage eased the choking grip of misery that never let me go.

Occasional reprieve happened only when Eera was nearby or when I was slaving at a construction site, or worked at the translation of another story. But even then, the crushing anxiety did not disappear entirely, but only receded into the background. Physical pain is more merciful – the part of the brain receiving the pain signals gets inured and eventually turned off, so the pain no longer reaches you.

I did not attempt to alleviate my situation. Firstly, because I never learned to analyze and make up plans for actions, I just lived on, silent about where it pains, enduring the unbearable. Secondly, the alternative to that agony was no less horrible than the torture itself…

Our team was sent to the local train stop "Priseimovye" by the bridge over the river of Seim to build a 2-apartment cottage for the track-men and their families. We worked there about a fortnight.

At one of the midday breaks, I spread my *spetzovka* on the grass and lay down next to the sun-scorched footpath with the traffic lines of ants bustling over the cracks in the ground. To pass the time at one-hour midday breaks, I had *Vsesvit*, a thick monthly received on subscription, where they printed Ukrainian translations from the world literature of all times and peoples. Soon, I got tired of reading and put my head on a page in the open magazine.

It was a sunny day around, filled to the brim with the busy summertime life. The ants were dragging their flotsam and jetsam along the cracked footpath, the tall grass, swaying under the rare gusts of breeze, carried the shaky shadows of leaves in the foliage of trees and bushes above it. The unending buzz of horseflies, bees, wasps, and common flies filled the sultry air.

From time to time, the breeze idly picked up the page next to the one under my head, and then everything around got screened off with whiteness and blurry spots of letters brought overmuch close to the pupil. The standing page effaced the piers of the bridge across the river, and the long spit of a narrow sand island washed up by the unruly current, as well as the fisherman standing on that island with his long fishing rod, everything got lost behind the whitish blurriness.

Then the page would fall back to disclose that same fisherman, yet standing in the current already up to the ankles of his high rubber boots. The fishing rod got bent by the taut line, he whipped it up snatching from the restless stream the flicking splendor of a catch. The geezer took it off the hook and threw behind his back onto the spit, where the fish went on pulsating in the sand. He threw the freshly baited hook back into the river and, watching the float, did not notice the river gull that crabbed up along the sand to the beating of the fish. Grabbing its prey, the bird flew off.

The fisherman did not see that, neither how another river gull dived from above the bridge, attacking the first one. They collided in the air fight, and the fish fell from a five-meter height back into the river. The geezer did not see anything of that, he stubbornly followed the float.

It was only I, who saw the whole episode, but nothing of it touched me. I did not even hold the page so as to watch uninterruptedly. The river and the white blur took turns before my eyes, and I saw that all of that was Nothing. All that life full of events and struggles and changes was just a series of pictures on top of Nothing. I watched, and I could also not watch and nothing would change anything. Everything was drowned in absolute Nothing. Even the constantly present pain receded getting flooded with Nothing, from which I did not need anything.

I lay stretched out like that long spit of sand around which the stream of life hasted on, gurgling and splashing, but both of us knew that all that was just one and the same, bleak, void, Nothing. That was some terrifying knowledge. How could you live with it? How to live on without wanting anything and rid of waiting for something? So, the choice I had was not overly extensive: either Eera and the hang-fire agony, or Nothing…

Eera was visiting Konotop without you as well. So was it for the occasion of Vladya's wedding, when the winter was setting in.

He married Alla, who already had a child and worked at a large canteen. The wedding party was held at that very canteen on the outskirts of the city, nearby the stop of the diesel train to Dubovyazovka. The "live music" included already heavily bald Skully and still curly-haired Chuba. At times, at the guests' warm requests, the groom also approached the mike to sing along with the ex-Orpheuses. Everything was delicious, loud, and fun.

But all that was on the second day of Eera's stay, and in the late evening of the first day, I made two discoveries. The first was about the hidden resources in the human body...

At the starting night, Eera and I passed thru the veranda to the attached room. In winter it was not heated and turned into a sort of storeroom for odd household things. That’s why when leaving the kitchen, Eera threw over her shoulders some of the jackets from the hooks by the

door; she always liked to try things on. In the room among the other things, there stood a pair of old armchairs, the relics from the Object times, whose wooden armrests still retained their yellow varnish and enough of stability to let us have deeply satisfying sex among other stored items. At such moments I did not think of any agonies...

We seemed to cum together but Eera, with her eyes half-closed, started to moan "More! More!." Until that moment, I knew it for dead sure that after orgasm you needed to catch a breath for at least half an hour.

"Mo-ore!."

And up I got to penetrate and go on above the glitter of the freshly spilled trickle that aspersed the floorboards a minute ago. However impossible, at times it, nonetheless, can happen…

The second discovery, concerning the white spots in the human's conscience, occurred when Eera and I returned to the living-room.

My father had already gone to the bedroom, and my mother, who felt completely out of sorts on that evening, sat on the folding coach-bed with her hands dropped widely off onto the seat, she was looking in front of her and not at the TV on its stand between the two windows. Only Lenochka was watching it from her, not yet slid-out, chair-bed. The subdued murmur of the TV merged with the feeble light from a couple of bulbs in the luster.

After groaning for a while, my mother asked me and Eera to help her to the bedroom because she had no strength in her at all. We took her by the arms from both sides and helped to get up. Giving out weak grunts and shuffling her slippers over the floor, she moved, with our support, towards the curtains in the doorway to the dark kitchen.

In that manner, the 3 of us reached the middle of the room beneath the chandelier of 5 white shades only 2 of which painted the circles of yellowish electric light in the whitewashed ceiling. When there remained a final couple of meters to the doorway, the light around me suddenly dimmed going away and I found myself confined in the darkness, not complete though because I could discern that I was having a sex with my mother from behind. Wild horror lashed me, kinda electric shock, and threw back into the lighted living-room. To the kitchen doorway, there still remained a distance of about a meter.

In fright, I gave Eera a sidelong glance over the white kerchief swaddling my mother's head. Eera, with her eyebrows knit together, took care to keep her eyes on the lowered profile of my mother as if she had not noticed anything. So, that was just a vision, yet more prolonged than that second of running thru the Greek night...

Asking Eera to hold alone for a sec, I hurried into the kitchen to turn the light on there. We took my mother to the bedroom and helped her to sink onto the bed, where my father muttered something in his sleep. Then we returned to the living-room.

Befuddled and kinda reeled, I slid the folding bed-armchair for Lenochka and slid out the folding coach-bed for us. Soon all of the *khutta* turned into a mutual sleeping kingdom. Only the clock on the wall above the TV was ticking from its plastic box against my temples. It also had no answer to what all that was at all and why that all had to be happening to me…

~ ~ ~

As always before, accepting the notebooks with my translations, Zhomnir jerked his bushy eyebrow up and started to read, inserting his pencil marks in between the widely spaced lines, though he agreed that his options were also not ideal.

"Your trouble, Sehrguey, is that Ukrainian is not your native tongue, you hadn't absorbed it with your mother's milk."

I refrained from stating that the first months in my life I was nourished with the milk of Carpathian cows.

He went over to his archival chamber and returned with a thin book in his hands. "These are Gutsalo's stories. That's how one should write!"

And Zhomnir began to read out excerpt lines from the book, clicking his tongue at the end of especially cool ones, then he handed the book to me for mastering the craft.

> (...I had read that collection as well as any other works by E. Gutsalo ever coming my way. What am I to do if singing praises of devotion to the morning dew on cucumber seedlings do not turn me up? (For that same reason, by the way, I do not like Yesyenin even though he's from Ryazan region.) Besides, after *The Enchanted Desna* by Dovzhenko, who had so beautifully exhausted the theme, attempts at picking it up anew are doomed to miserable copying of the flavors and mood.
>
> And when Gutsalo tried his hand at writing on city life, he dropped off to the level of cartoons in the satirical magazine *Perets*. I am ready to agree that in one of his stories of that period, he managed to mention the reddish brick dust on the black padded jackets of bricklayers, but the detail had nothing to do with the plot nor with the characters in the story. The good but odd detail just stayed dangling about, a kinda limp cock in an immense vagina...
>
> The constituent parts of a work should add, converge, and develop the whole structure, the way it's done by pulling the constellation of the Southern Cross and the shimmer of lamplight in the red hair of the doctor on the empty ship deck in the lines opening *The Rain* by Somerset Maugham, to suggestively send the reader's train of thoughts down the road towards the clash of priesthood and prostitution...)

Yet Zhomnir should know better and, so as to compensate for the faulty nurture in my early days and mitigate the backwash of skipping the Ukrainian literature lessons at School 13, I took a thin

copybook, titled it "Ukr. Lit." and then read all of the books in Ukrainian from the 2 long shelves in the Plant Club library.

There were both Lesya Ukrainka and her mother Olena Bdgilka, and Panas Myrny with his oxen, and the splendidly great Kobzar, and Marko Vovchok, and Ivan Franko, and Jankowski (idolized by Zhomnir) and many others in alphabetical order. About some of them, even Zhomnir knew only from the skimpy notes taken at the overview lectures attended by him in his student years.

> (...after sifting all of that thru the sieve of careful reading, I can safely state that in the terms of artistic value most of the authorised authors failed at creating anything above the level of petty amateurs. Quoting a Ukrainian proverb, "Where there is no nightingale, you'll get nothing but sparrow chirrup."
>
> The sparrow-squealers just kept retelling the latest European fashion in the contemporary belles-lettres. That's great! Glory be to them! The Ukrainian language began to be seen thru the press. However, that's politics and I am talking about the literature.
>
> As of yet, only three authors in the Ukrainian literature would pass with their colors flying in front of the world literary standards:
>
> 1. poet Kandyba, aka Olyes, who had for years been wallowing knee-deep in blood at the Kiev slaughterhouse, writing the tenderest poems imaginable;
>
> 2. writer Vasil Stephanic;
>
> 3. writer Les Martović.
>
> Real master knows what he wants to say, because he has what to say, and he also knows how to say it even without much of learning, just as humans find out the way of natural breathing. The rest of the literature aficionados are left with jingling their cowbells in an attempt to portray the newest of the fashionable waltzes by Herr Strauss, which he creates to the delight and admiration of the decent European public.
>
> Still and regardless! We will catch up, and overtake his orchestra because we've got our inimitable balalaikas!.)

So, after work, I had what to busy myself with. And even a local train could be easily turned into a passable study. That's why on Fridays, I came to At-Seven-Winds with the briefcase and, after work, in the train car, I took out of it a thin copybook, a pen, and a volume of stories by Maugham, in English.

Stooping over the compact print in a book page, I plunged into the tender humid night of the exotic southern seas, where the fragrance of the jungle in bloom spreads for miles beyond the islands.

Emerging back from there with a pair of rough lines for the copybook, I stacked the pinch into the ruled-paper cells, and dived away to roam forth along the sandy beach by the water's edge with white-crested, even in the dark, waves of the rolling surf, and, with a start, looked thru the pane in the car window... Pryosterny?.

Delicious rides they were…

Writing into a copybook placed atop of the briefcase was not comfortable, yet the desk problem found its elegant solution. On Fridays after work, I extracted from my locker the plywood piece intended for the shelf to keep a headgear because if you're holding a piece of plywood 50cm × 60cm pressed in your armpit, it doesn't look too outrageous and, actually, it is not in the way when boarding a bus or a train car.

Upon arrival in Nezhyn, the desk of plywood perfectly fitted into an automatic storage cell, while the briefcase traveled to Red Partisans and there under the table covered with the tulle tablecloth, on which the old pier mirror stood leaning against the wall. The expenses for storage of that single item in a cell amounted to reasonable 30 kopecks: 15 kopecks to set the code inside the door and slam it, 15 kopecks more to open it, after collecting the code from outside.

Once, on the way back to Konotop, the cell door jammed. In such cases, it's opened by an on-duty station attendant with a special key, and in the presence of a militiaman. Before opening the frivolous cell, the militiaman asked me about the things put inside.

I did not want to expose the fella to an unnecessary strain and never mentioned any desk nor shelf, but the ungrateful bonehead utterly refused to believe even in a piece of plywood.

When the attendant opened the cell door, I pulled out those 50cm × 60cm and walked away, yet the militiaman for a considerable stretch kept at the cell agape, peeping into the void of its dusty innards. He, to use the favorite byword of our team foreman, Mykola Khizhnyak, was inspecting it like a magpie the piece of busted bone. A trivial magic trick, dumbo…

And at times the briefcase was filled with also things for laundry because Eera had instructed me to bring the washing over. I readily obeyed because it felt like we were, sort of, becoming a family, even though in the mother-in-law's washing machine but still somehow, yes….

However, the first family celebration was no success. You had turned exactly 1 year old, and I invited Eera out to a restaurant. She refused because Gaina Mikhailovna was not in favor of our going to restaurants.

Well, at first, Eera a little hesitated: to go or not to go? But I failed at persuading her because of my tongue-tied manner of speaking. Most often the fits of tongue-tiedness befall me at some casual, everyday, situations, I just cannot explain obvious things. "Well, you know, let's go, eh?"

Some impressive appeal, you bet... And in the meanwhile the mother-in-law, leaning against the jamb of the bedroom door, trots out neat arguments, slick as a whistle, that it takes a decent woman at least 2 days to get prepared for going to a restaurant.

"Well, what? Come on, let's go, eh?"

And a suchlike pitiful crap instead of saying, that it's our daughter's first birthday which would never happen again and that sometimes an impromptu might be a better hit than hatched events.

Tongue-tiedness is a real curse. It calls for some abstract topic for me to be quick as a wink at turning a repartee...

When Brezhnev for the first and final time was passing Konotop by the train made of just a couple of cars, they put up his portrait, 2 months in advance, in a tin shield taller than the station itself. The giant close-up of dear Leonid Ilyich—Mind, Honor and Conscience of our Time—with all his Gold Star medals of the Hero of the Soviet Union on his jacket breast. In case, he would glance from the bypassing car and see how totally we loved him around here.

Only they forgot to warn me on the day of his traveling by, and I walked from the Settlement along the tracks until a militia sergeant stopped me, and told I could not go to the station.

Okay, said I, I was going to the Under-Overpass and not the station which I could easily bypass by taking that service path so that to keep my jeans clear of the fuel-oil-smeared rails.

The guy in the militia uniform loved and respected Brezhnev no more than I did. However, taking into account the concomitant circumstances—a person without a uniform trying to prove something to a uniform-rigged guy who, moreover, had an order—he asked me an absolutely well-grounded question, "Are you sick?"

To which, without a moment’s delay, I gave it out proudly, "I am incurably infected with life."

Yay! I liked the sound of it myself. The sergeant, from awe and admiration, could not find what else to say but did not let me pass all the same….

That is why I had to celebrate the family holiday alone, although Eera and Gaina Mikhailovna predicted in a duo that nothing good would come of it.

Yes, the prophecy was slap accurate. All I managed to get in the "Polissya" restaurant was a shot of vodka – the last in stock, so they told me. I was encouraged to buy a bottle of cognac instead, but I'm not a drunk to put away a half-liter cognac single-handed. So, I concentrated on that lonely shot and meditations, for a snack, on the futility of arguing with Mothers and that under the conditions of all-pervading matriarchy there certainly had to be a system of communicating vessels between my mother-in-law and the unfriendly waitress.

In the "Seagull" restaurant, located farther off from Red Partisans, I bought a fluky bottle of champagne and also a parsley salad... On my way back from the celebration, the champagne, naturally, hit my bladder.

In those days I tried to do everything right (in the hope to avoid the inevitable). That was, like, sort of insurance – the righteous guy's wife couldn't cheat on him...or what? There, of course, was no guarantee but, if not to consider the matter too closely, the assumption inspired some puny hope... As long as peeing in the sidewalk was wrong, I headed for the toilet in the Bazaar whose gate turned out to be locked for a long time before my coming, and I had to climb over. That also was not entirely correct, but not too noticeable in the dark.

By the time when in the corner of the empty and dark Bazaar I approached the iron-sheet door to the toilet, it already bore a block-letter inscription "On Repair" drawn in chalk. Meanwhile, the champagne reached the peak in its fight for freedom, so I had to pour my indignation at the dictatorship of the communicating vessels out on that same door. Without impairing the inscription though.

Well, and who else could met me climbing out down the gate but a militia patrol? Welcome to your native planet! Of course, they did not buy it that someone would go over the closed gate when there was so much of sidewalk in the dark around, and I was taken to the sobering-up station.

The doctor there, to check my stage of intoxication, offered to perform several forward bends.

"Heels together, toes apart?" inquired I conversationally. But that capillary vessel complicated the task, and I had to do the bends with my feet pressed close to each other.

Then the doc asked how much and which stuff namely had been consumed, received clear information and, with a shrug, handed me over to the lieutenant.

The lieutenant wanted to know my place of work and, learning I was not local, asked for my mother-in-law's number and called Gaina Mikhailovna to identify my voice over the phone. Then they just pointed at the door, refusing to give me a little lift, and threatening to lock me up if I attempt to do any more nuisance of myself.

Thus, despite the die-hard opposition by conspiring females and their henchmen, your first birthday became a truly unique event – the one and only time when I got into a sobering-up station…

~ ~ ~

The development of my marital relationship with Eera moved onward thru gradual and quite predictable stages. At first, when after a working week I came to Nezhyn and excitedly pressed the coveted nipple in the doorbell, Eera in a flash opened the door for me. I hugged her in the hallway, and we kissed.

She even smeared my wrists with glycerin to treat the skin cracks from the frost at the construction site. "Oh, what a silly fool you are!" said Eera and I felt happy, although the cracks smarted.

At the following stage, the kissing got cut out. Still later, instead of embraces, we exchanged the casual cues, "How d'you?" "Fine." And that is correct because something had to be said anyway.

The relationship did not stop at that, and the door started to be opened by my parents-in-law, mostly by Ivan Alexeyevich. Sometimes, I had to push the doorbell button twice already...

In the winters when my hands' skin condition became of no interest, I stopped freezing it. Probably, I grew more experienced, or else the skin realized it had no chances of being treated with glycerin anymore.

At our final kiss in the hallway, I instantly realized that something was wrong. Instead of her lips, Eera somehow guiltily set up her neck, and there wafted a whiff of fox. It's not that I had ever sniffed a fox, yet directly got it – the vixen funk. Later on that visit, she told me that she had been home alone, the doorbell rang and it turned out to be one of her classmates from school. He knelt before her in the kitchen, embraced and kissed her knees, but she told him to leave and nothing happened.

And there, of course, happened another fit of covert agony, but even choking in the steely grip of jealousy I still managed to keep my heartbeat bursting absolutely out of time and, when it numbed and breathing gradually normalized, I somehow began to live on further…

From the hallway, I proceeded to the bathroom to wash my hands, and then entered the living-room to say "good evening" to everyone absorbed in TV watching, and to sit down at the table abutting the windowsill.

The table center was allotted to the TV but, beside it, there remained enough of the oilclothed room for the plate, fork, and bread laid by Eera so that I could have a supper. I did not block the screen and did not bother anyone, if only aesthetically – by my chewing profile on the left from the TV... Then I took the plates to the kitchen and washed up, as well as all that crockery-cutlery stacked in the sink after the meals on that day. I was not ashamed to wash up even when Tonya's husband, Ivan, was entering the kitchen. On the contrary, I was proud that Gaina Mikhailovna trusted me with the task and that after a couple of strict proficiency tests I was approved for the job of a weekend pearl diver.

First of all, I boiled a kettle of water on the gas stove, because it took too long to heat it in the boiler, for which it was necessary to bring firewood from the basement. The process of washing up took place in a large enamel bowl put in the sink. Civilization had not yet come up with detergents and other useful things for washing dishes then and, for a start, with a bar of laundry soap I rubbed a large piece of gauze to give it rich foam. And in the end, of course, I rinsed them all under the tap, in strict keeping with the requirements of technology shared by Gaina Mikhailovna. Washing up helped me to pass the time. I even liked it, especially in that part of operation, when the turned on gas was hissing and burning its blueish flame under the kettle bottom.

Besides, I was trusted with dusting the carpet taken off the floor in the living room out to the yard. It was a shabby thread-bare rug, so one could feel free to beat it thoroughly when dusting.

Sometimes, when I was working it over, Eera would go out in the yard and say that it was enough already because the neighbors in the apartment block were human beings too and deserved compassion. And Gaina Mikhailovna once remarked that the method of my dusting showed the temper of a born translator. I cannot imagine where she could have seen translators busy with that job…

At times, I offered some services on my own accord. Like, when Gaina Mikhailovna was very worried about her son Igor being ill and hospitalized in Kiev, because she could not go there and find out how he was, and I suggested that I would go.

Igor was very surprised and could not believe that I had come to Kiev without any other agenda but visiting him. 4 hours on a local train to see my brother-in-law, with whom I did not know what to talk about. If I disclosed having a certain interest of my own, and that in those 4 hours I had finally read *The Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* by Radishchev, would it feel better for him?

Then I had time and again to report to my mother-in-law what her son looked like. Well, he looked quite normal, except for an unmistakably monkish air, like all the other patients there. It was an officers-only hospital where they were given long blue gowns, yet allowed to keep their military forage caps. The combination resulted in an awesomely wondrous costume, especially when you watched the ostensibly strolling shut-ins in peripatetic gossip pairs along the allies in the tiny outside garden – the cape-like Merlin-style blue garbs beneath the khakied halos with the scrambled-eggs of cockades. Some special order of monks: Forage-Cappians…

And I was also entrusted to coat the apartment floor with the glossy red paint. Not at one go, naturally, because people had to live in the apartment undergoing the process of renovation; so it took two weekend-visits. But the kitchen, the hallway, and the corridor connecting them, Ivan Alexeyevich painted in my absence.

He helped me a lot when I decided to make bookshelves in the form of a bookcase without doors and walls. The shelves were, sure enough, designed for our future family library. 10 volumes of *The Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language* were already collected. I was too late to subscribe to the Dictionary, but many of its subscribers soon stopped to waste their money, and the rejected volumes were put on free sale at bookstores. Apart from the incomplete collection of the Dictionary, there were full Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's works in 4 volumes, a dozen books in English and a hotchpotch company angled at different bookstores...

At SMP-615, I could not find the material required for the project and asked my father-in-law to have the planks planed and cut in the carpenter workshop at the Nezhyn Bakery Plant. So, I supplied him with the list of measurements of what I needed... He brought the bundle of readied plank pieces and dumped it in the hallway of his apartment, then started to convince me it was impossible to make anything worthy out of them. He even called Eera to the hallway to be an arbitrary, "Look, what shelves could be made of these slats?" And those indeed looked very slim but, before asking him, I had thought out thoroughly how to make shelves that would be both light and sturdy.

The project was accomplished at 13, Decemberists because in Nezhyn there were neither conditions nor tools for such an undertaking. And when I sawed out the bridle joints in the planks and spread casein glue over the tenons to stick them into mortices and, when they dried, polished with sandpaper, and covered with light yellow varnish, then even my father approved the shelves.

Eera, on one of her solo visits to Konotop, was not too much impressed though, at furniture stores you could see more baroque items; yes, they're shelves, and so what?. As for Ivan Alexeyevich's false forecasts, it could easily be understood – the workman at the Nezhyn Bakery Plant workshop told him the planks were unsuitable for the project, and he just repeated the opinion of a specialist…

~ ~ ~

But then my initial perambulations about Eera's parents' apartment grew even shorter because I canceled eating in the living room... The decision was made when after my arrival at Red Partisans, it took my father-in-law way too long to open the door and, eventually entering the hallway, I heard the cries of a squabble. It happens, you know, a casual family stank.

I heard angry yells of Ivan, Tonya's husband, in high-pitched tones, then she herself flashed thru the corridor to the kitchen and back to the living-room, where more voices wrangled in a confused manner. Eera peeped into the hallway, "The bread is on the table, you bring the rest of snack along from the kitchen." And she disappeared again to bicker on with Ivan.

On account of my arrival, the theater of hostilities moved over to the bedroom of Tonya's family. From the living room, it was only heard that Ivan took a circular defense in the corner, and his parents-in-law and sister-in-law, individually and then in chorus, cried out to him what particularly they were not happy with. The words remained indistinct, like, Pillutikha's curses, but I could tell that Ivan was responding with dour short bursts, like a Bandera-guerrilla used to use the ammo sparingly. At times, some of the attackers retreated to the living room to recollect what else they could've omitted to divulge and then again rush back to join the clashes. Except for Tonya, who did not leave the bedroom, but kept monotonously banging off her dismal clue. I did not even look in there, but everything was clear enough, family squabbles do not shine with the diversity of dispositions.

And all that turmoil raged against the background of wild screams from the rebellious farmers in the Central Asia, because the TV was feeding series of *The Man is Changing His Skin* and they kept rushing discontentedly from one edge of the screen to the other. Hence the voices. The rioters were taking the full advantage of watchers being busy with personal sorting out in the bedroom. Then the *dehkans* grew so impudent that even jumped out of the TV, and continued their scrambles all over the oilcloth on the table.

And I knew that you could expect anything from that TV… One Sunday, my mother-in-law cooked soup from a raw bone and put the plate for me next to the TV where some mafia clan members were forcing a judge to commit suicide. And, when he put a bullet thru his temple, the brains splashed out smack into my plate – oops! What was there to do with my mother-in-law

standing vigilant behind my back to control if I would show the proper respect to her cooking? I had to lap it hot…

Yet, no one would escape the just retribution, and now, when the TV and I remained eye to eye, I clicked it onto another channel. It turned out a neatly mellow violin quartet of chamber music. What a relief!.

But then the father-in-law jogged from the bedroom for recharging. And he felt that something was amiss, not as stimulating as expected. He did not immediately realize that it was because of the cello. What could a cello possibly do in a Central Asian bedlam? Unfortunately, he got it what was what, and clicked the channels back, directly into the wild grateful wails of dehkans, "Ala-la-ah!" He swallowed it, like a sip of energizer and, with replenished ammunition, rushed back to the interminable battle…

Since that night, on my arrival, after the hallway and the bathroom, I made straight for the kitchen. There I laid the kitchen table to have some *havvage*. And I never opened the fridge, so as not to give Gaina Mikhailovna the pretext for her undertone mumbling reprimands to Eera.

While I was eating, you would come running to the kitchen with agitated chatter in your own, as yet not very understandable, language… However, I again have run ahead of the events…

~ ~ ~

To keep Eera, my Eera, to ensure that she would be mine and mine only, I went down the path of righteous life.

> (...they do not sell the code of righteousness at the news stalls because no one needs them. Without checking it by code, anyone knows whether they did the right thing or not. Even if your wrong-doing can be bolstered with tons of excuses and justifications, or even called for by written law, and all around glamorized your deed, "well done! good fellow!" you still know, deep in your heart, that you'd better not have done that and, at that point, you'll be right, because you can't deceive yourself and you know all along what's right from what isn't.
>
> They finish their empty praise, disperse, and now you're left to live on and wade thru your own disgust at yourself and futile blinking at the scruples or, maybe, tries at drowning them in more and more atrocious yet commendable wiles...
>
> Honestly, my quest for righteousness sprung from a personal interest: if I kept doing everything right then nothing wrong would happen to me, otherwise, it would be so unfair. That flimsy guesswork served the main prop to pin my hopes on. I never felt like looking under the hood of my loose construction and only tried—and real hard too—to do everything right...)

That's why it took bricklayer Peter Lysoon 2-3 hours less than me to finish the walls of a bathroom-toilet unit. No wooden insertions? Who cares? Spit a spat, and go on laying the unit

walls. When the carpenters come to install the doors, they would think of something to do about fixing the problem.

The partition laid up with a "belly"? So what? Say: "they'll lap it up!" and leave it as it is. The plasterers would come and solve the issue with an additional mortar layer.

But that's not right. Therefore, my specialization in the team was gypsum partitions, and that of Peter – bathrooms. However, nothing was dogma and there always happened moments for a harum-scarum "off we drive!" and forced castlings.

Yes, doing everything right is a time-consuming undertaking, but that's not the whole story because choosing the path of stringent righteousness you can't constrict yourself to the limits of current life, you start to strive for fixing wrongful deeds committed in the life past, which goal calls for open repentance…

When I came to the institute hostel, former freshman Sehrguey from Yablunivka was finishing his fourth year of study, and still lived in Room 72. I returned to him the thick *English-Russian Dictionary* by Mueller.

"Ho-ho! How come?"

"I stole it from you."

After a moment's confusion, everyone in the room burst into a loud laughter, willy-nilly joined by me.

> (...what's funny there? In his story *Jane*, Maugham explains that there's nothing funnier than the truth…)

Nobody laughed though at the library of the Plant Club when I returned a couple of books stolen there and confessed that one more was missing and that I was really sorry and ready to reimburse. They discharged my unrecorded loans, forgave me without compensation and did not even cancel my reader form...

2 weeks later, my father started to upbraid me for behaving as if I was not all there. He stuck the forefinger out of his fist and fiercely drilled the air nearby his right temple.

I translated his gesture into the parlance of the Holy Script, "Go and take him for he's out of his mind."

"And again some frostbitten hooey! Gone nuts in Nezhyn? Is that what you've been sent to the institute for?"

Then I lowered the bar, and switched over to the Ukrainian folklore, "With the father's *khutta* burnt down, whose attic will the sparrows spend nights in?"

Unfortunately, the widely-known koan was out of the elder's ken and the following half-month or so the 2 match boxes dropped at ready by the tiny gas stove on the table for cooking in the veranda were missing. But then everything settled down and returned to normal.

"I'm ashamed before people! You enter the streetcar and get frozen like a statue with your look nailed to the window."

"I have to knock step dance along the car, eh?"

"No!! Just be like everyone else: 'hello! how are you? fine!' Do not be a renegade!"

And then the Central Television news program "Time" showed an employee at the Moscow Central Library named after Lenin, who confessed that for several years he kept purloining valuable publications from the archival department, under the gray smock of his uniform. I realized that I was not alone redeeming wrong-doings of the past. But what was it to make him follow the path to righteousness?

"The fur-coat form of schizophrenia."

Unexpectedly entering the kitchen, I overheard my father announcing to my mother the diagnosis turned out by Tamara of the 4th kilometer in Chernigov, which, most likely, reached him with Eera’s mediation...

Yet, later on, the sorcerer of Ichnya, after a couple of visits by my sister Natasha there, said he had done his job and I was put aright. Eera became happy with the news, but not I. Life became boring. The overwhelming powerful stream of consciousness, in which I had to choose the fairway like those rafters driving their log rafts down the foam-boiling rapids in the Carpathian rivers, turned into placid shoals. I could still see breakthroughs of the impossible into the world of everyday life—where everyone is like everyone else—but between those insights and me, there already rose that dreary grating from the Bulgakov's novel, its dusty grates canceling all pirate brigantines in the unknown seas. The heat and full-blooded throb of the belonging vanished.

> (...it's one thing when you actually ride a log-raft that keep jostling and bumping under your feet, and quite another kettle of fish if you can any moment hit button Pause, and leave everything frozen until you've poured yourself a cup of tea...)

"Gimme my schizophrenia back!" with genuine bitterness pleaded I Natasha, but it was too late…

In Nezhyn, on the platform near the station's building corner, where the round clock hung on the bar protruding from the wall, Eera and I were waiting for the local train to Konotop.

She had the three-quarter yellow jacket on, and the day around was also sunny, a good summer day it was. Eera smiled at me and said, "When I'll be bad, remember me as I am now when I love you."

"Nonsense. You can't become bad."

"Don't argue, I know."

"How can you know?"

"I know. I am a witch."

Her eyes turned sad, and a slight imperceptible cross-eyedness crept into them. It was as slight as my disappointment, for I had once thought she was a devil in love like in the book which I stole for Novoselytsky.

"No worry," said I, "I'm a hexer too."

Although what hexer could be of me? Some sleepy warlock at best… This thought was prompted by the black hardback cover of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by Hegel which I bought in Odessa and was reading in the trailer of our team during the midday breaks.

Well, okay, to call it "reading" would be a rank bragging. I could not wallow thru more than one page in a break, because of inevitable dozing off... I wonder if the translator understood himself what he was turning out, or just rendered on with "a perplexed mind"?.

In that Odessa bookstore, they did not want to sell this book to me. The two saleswomen were playing for time, exchanging accusatory glances. At that time, the cause of their embarrassment was so amazingly clear: they had been expecting a real warlock to pick up the book in coarse black bounds, but now I just do not know what to think... What's the difference who buys what in the world where each one is like anyone else? Be happy to complete the sales plan…

I kept Hegel in my locker. The lockers in our team trailer had no locks, but nothing disappeared from there. Except for the diploma badge and a book by some Moscow literary bungler.

I was reading that stuff borrowed from my mother-in-law's hutch simply out of the sense of duty, and I felt relieved when it got lost half-way thru. Then I brought The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the way of experiment, to check if they would lift it as well, but no! Unassisted, I had to read it to the very end. And then it turned out, that it was not Hegel who wrote it at all, but somewhat Rozenkrantz noting down his lectures. Then he published those notes for them to translate the thing into Russian so that I would slumber peacefully in our team trailer. And thank you ever so much.

> (...sometimes I ask myself: did the original lecturer understand what exactly he was giving out? Or was it just his way to make a living with a tricky juggling of a "thing-unto-itself", a "thin-in-itself" and other things in whimsical juxtapositions?...)

But one passage I did understand completely, where there was reasoning that a German bricklayer had to consume a half-pound of bacon and a pound of bread to fulfill his daily norm, while a French one managed to do it with just a bunch of grapes under his belt…

~ ~ ~

That summer saw the reconstruction at 13, Decemberists. As projected by my father, the door from the veranda to the attached room was sealed and the latter got connected instead to the living room. The changes allowed for the heat from the kitchen stove to reach the attached room in winter making it livable all year round. The rest of the *khutta* was renovated too.

After the reconstruction, I moved to the attached-joined room and a friend of Natasha came on a visit from the city of Shostka. She had been a group-mate of my sister at the Konotop Railway Technical School. Later, Natasha's girlfriend got married and divorced but she had no regrets because of her skills at sewing jeans like "Levi's" and though the fabric in her jeans was notably not genuine the business thrived and brought a good income.

She was not too tall, but well-tanned, and she had dyed hair to emphasize her appetizing figure. Yet, moving towards righteousness, I, certainly, kept in check my glances and never asked Natasha for how long her friend was going to stay.

Coming back from work, I sat at the desk in my room and read a book in English keeping a dictionary at hand, or else *Morning Star,* the newspaper of British communists. Probably, they were not exactly communists but, nonetheless, their paper was sold at newsstands in the land of victorious socialism for 13 kopecks piece. After dinner, I worked at translations and had no spare time for special communication with the guest.

I did not know how Eera learned about the visitor at 13, Decemberists, but she suddenly started asking questions about Natasha's girlfriend and then announced that she herself wanted to move to Konotop, so I had to talk about it with my parents.

Returning to Konotop on outspread wings, I at once called my father and mother into the yard. They got seated, side by side, on the bench under the tree by the porch way on whose steps I kept standing and taming effervescent joy frothing within me. Then I informed them on Eera's wish to move to 13, Decemberists. And I was completely unprepared for what happened next.

My mother crossed her arms over her chest and said that she would not accept Eera because it was impossible for two of them to get along together in one place.

I heard her words but could not get it – what's that? My mother who always pulled for me was now sitting on the bench, with her arms crossed, saying she wouldn't have Eera around here.

I turned to the father for help. He shrugged, "What can I do? All documents on the *khutta* are issued in her name, she is the landlady."

It was already dark in the yard, but in the light of the lamp lit in the veranda, I saw my mother's unwavering, unyielding stance. Desperately, exerted I my mind to limit in search for any worthwhile arguments, appeals, for anything at all, but it was blank and void and dead sure that nothing whatsoever would mollify her.

My father went over into the house and I, overpowered by the hollow emptiness in my head, sat limply on a porch step.

The wicket latch-handle chinked, and the visiting girlfriend of Natasha's entered the yard. She was alone, without my sister. "And why are you like that?" asked she, and got seated next to my mother.

My mother immediately enlivened and started to explain that the next day the 4 of them—my parents, Natasha and Lenochka—would go to the RepBase camp for recreation by the Seim river. However, the refrigerator was full and those staying back at the *khutta* could cater for themselves.

The girlfriend approved and turned so that the light from the veranda would boldly delineate her large breasts under the taut clinging turtleneck.

Even dumbfounded as I was by the result of the negotiations with my parents, I realized that I was doomed, and when left eye-to-eye with such breasts, without anyone else in the whole *khutta*, no bridle would restrain me safely. I knew myself and got it clearly that my righteousness would not persist for a whole week, and even the fact that she was my mother's nickname would not save me because, no matter what the fridge was full of, the innocent lamb prepared for the sacrifice was I….

The next day after work, I did not go, as usual, along the railway tracks and the wall surrounding the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant to Decemberists Street, but got on the streetcar going to the Settlement and rode to School 13. From there, I moved along Nezhyn Street, entering the yards of *khutta*s with one invariable question, "Where can I rent an apartment?"

At number thirty-something, I was told that in the *khutta* under the big birch opposite the Nezhyn Store, they seemed to be renting.

The birch was found in the indicated place, and it was so old and tall that the red brick *khutta* under it looked very small. However, it had two rooms and a kitchen, apart from the dark hallway-veranda.

The landlady, a single pensioner Praskovya Khvost, suspiciously looked me over, but showed a room of three by two meters, with the window looking out onto the wide trunk of the birch in the neglected front garden. One-third of the room was occupied by an iron bed produced before WWII and the room itself was entered thru the doorway from the kitchen screened off with hanging curtains. To the right from the same kitchen, behind the same curtains in the doorway, there was the owner's room.

For me, it was essential to leave 13, Decemberists on that very day, and we agreed on 20 rubles a month.

> (...Later, Lydda from our team told me that I could find an apartment in At-Seven-Winds for just 18 rubles, but I kept to where I was...)

Coming to Decemberists Street, I borrowed a handcart from a neighbor, put it at the wicket to number 13, and only then entered the yard.

Seated in the folding bed-armchair, Galya was watching TV. I said polite "hello" and that I was not hungry, and then went over to my room to collect the books and disassemble the bookshelves.

The self-made windows in the room did not have leaves to open, that's why I had to take the things out iterating thru the living room and the kitchen. So as not to change the shoes with slippers at each go, I paved the floor with pages from *Morning Star*. The young woman in surprised silence watched my manipulations from her armchair.

I took the books and bookshelves' parts to the handcart waiting in the street. All fitted in, only I had to drive slowly because the varnished shelves, stacked on top, were sliding over each other.

In the *khutta* by the Nezhyn Store, my landlady had a visitor. The 2 old women grew silent and watched the underground functionary shipping stacks of illegal literature to his new safe house...

Back in Decemberists Street, I returned the handcart to its owner and gathered some of my clothes—the briefcase from Odessa stood at the ready—then I said polite "goodbye" to Galya, and left her to enjoy the TV because I knew how to win with dignity.

(...of course, it was not her fault to get into the thick of a family sorting out, yet later she managed to marry a guy from the Settlement, not for too long though, but that's already her personal story...)

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ Defying the Wash

The landlady fondly quoted her deceased spouse and every other day boozed with her veteran lady-friends, not in the kitchen though, because of the tenant, but behind the closed curtains in the doorway to her room.

Softly, I kept turning pages in the rented room and did not intervene with anything – no use forbidding folks to live their lives in style.

My connection with 13 Decemberists was not cut off entirely. I had to ask my father to manufacture at the RepBase some spare parts to the wardrobe designed for installation in my room. He produced a prop and two thin tubes according to my sketch; my mother sewed the needed piece of burlap and it turned out a fabric-walled wardrobe in the corner, as it once was in the hallway of our apartment at the Object. However, since then the advancement of technology moved far ahead and the top for my wardrobe served a Polystyrol plate, light and thick, of those used for thermal isolation finishing inside the walls of railway cars renovated at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant.

The room was seemingly too squalid to become a safe house, and conspirators shunned to show up. So I switched over to considering it a hermitage cell whose appearances were to my liking, especially the black-and-white bark of the birch behind the window pane allowing for no other view; sometimes, when tired of translations, I just sat and looked at the black marks in the huge tree trunk.

When I settled down, my mother came for a visit, escorted by my father. In the kitchen, my former and my current landladies measured each other with mute, irreconcilable, glances while exchanging official nods. Then my parents stood and sighed silently under the raw bulb hanging from the ceiling on its dust-blackened wire. To all their questions I responded in a polite, though monosyllabic, way and they soon left because the one and only chair in the room was not stimulating much longer stay.

Mid-September, in the middle of a working week, Eera came from Nezhyn. She found our construction site in At-Seven-Winds, I changed in the trailer, and we went off to the city. I always liked that romantically loose cloak reaching below her knees.

We went to visit Lyalka. His wife, Valentina, was relieved to learn that everything was fine by us. A couple of times, after occasional quarrels between me and Eera, she used to later come to Konotop asking Valentina to call me from the Settlement which was a long way from Peace Square. And so, with Valentina's mediation, Eera and I reconciled upon the folding coach-bed covered with a hard carpet in the Valentina and Lyalka's living-room.

In fact, you'd hardly call them "quarrels", it's only that at times Eera got in a huff and felt like yelling. Like, because I was so ugly to look at, which she discerned after we went out to watch some sort of a comedy with faggy innuendos produced at the MosFilm studious. Or else, that no one would ever be interested in those translations of mine...

But real wrangles between us just did not work. Despite my tongue-tiedness, I somehow managed to convince her that such yells were not our role, why to give out other people's clues? However stupid it might seem, but I myself understood what I meant although could not express it properly...

And it happened just once that I misbehaved. That time I brought my payment from SMP-615 and put it on the table under the old pier-mirror. Eera asked how much was there and then started yelling that was not money. She did not need such alms!

Then I grabbed that skinny stack and tore it in two before throwing out of the window... While Eera was away out in the yard, I did not know what to do and kept cursing bitterly my lack of restraint.

At my stay on the next weekend, Eera somewhat shyly shared that they do accept glued bills at the bank.

> (...and that's correct because banks also need money, and 70 rubles are not scattered in your path, except when you chanced to pass under a window on the first floor, but even then in a torn-up condition...)

What I, personally, was surprised by at that occasion, it's the poor quality of paper used for printing money. Say, if you cut some funny money of newspaper—the same number of bills—it would be harder to tear it up that my payment. It literally went in two of its own will, in my hands….

Then we visited the new Culture House of the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant built next to Bazaar. They say the construction cost amounted to 6 million rubles. The Loony's Director, Bohmstein, moved over there to embrace the same position. The Culture House had only two floors, less than in Loony, but on the upper one, there was a ballroom with a bar.

We came to my apartment the moment when Praskovya was driving her orgy of alcoholic widows out into the neighborhood. I introduced her and Eera to each other in the kitchen. The landlady carefully examined her and, in my opinion, she also liked Eera's loose raincoat. She even kissed her suddenly and me as well, on the spur of the moment, and then went to sleep behind her curtains.

Eera made a small grimace of misunderstanding, however, she did not dare resist, and as for me, I did not care at all. One time Eera and I were going by a local train, and some gay guy from the opposite seat started to make overtures to me. Eera simply flew in a temper; she even started bickering with him, and that was ridiculous because I always was indifferent to them. Say, once, Sasha Chalov's daddy kissed me on the cheek, and now it was tipsy Praskovya. Who would care?

Yet, in my entire life I've never come across a more sweet, lasciviously tender and, at the same time, so eagerly tight-fitting cunt than on that night; even by Eera herself it was both the first and last time that I happened to feel it that way. As for where the carnal treat of a lifetime had sprung from – the austere interior of a monk's cell or the kinda blessing double kiss by the boozed landlady – I remain in the dark till now, and pretty firmly too.

> (...there is still a whole lot of questions that I won't find answers to. Never...)

~ ~ ~

Later that autumn, I was sent to the railway station of Vorozhba to work at the construction of the three-story Communication House where the walls and the roof were already in place and my

responsibility was laying the partitions. While there, I got another proof that the body of a human being is much smarter than he himself...

At both ends of the building, there were inside staircases with only one of them completed. Newly arrived at the site and not fully acquainted with the details of the current situation, I started up the right one until noticed that the steps between the second and third floors had not been yet inserted and just the pair of channels for the eventual montage of stairs were tilted up to the landing in between the two floors. Feeling lazy to traverse all of the rather long building to the other staircase, I decided to climb up the channel by the wall, whose width of 10 cm seemed enough. So, I turned sideways and, facing the wall, made a couple of careful steps upward.

Then I discovered my mistake – the channel ran too close along the wall whose surface kept my center of gravity dangerously off, too far over the void below, an offset for another inch would send my body into a dive precipitated, according to the laws of physics, by the free-fall acceleration, onto the debris interspersed by crooked spikes of rebar-rods, deep in the basement.

The undertaking did not seem worth it already. However, having moved up the channel I could not back those two steps already in the reverse direction, there was not room enough to even turn my face without losing balance, because of the shifted off location of my gravity's center. So, I clung to the red brick wall as if to something most dear to me and viewed an unforgettable transformation: my hands turned into separate tiny asynchronous octopuses, each finger lived its individual life bending in all directions, searching for holes in between the bricks. As they got rooted in the wall, I pulled myself upward and then cautiously shuffled my feet up the sloping channel. After many a repetition of that trick, we got out.

But I remain dead sure that were the mortar slushed to fill joints in the brick courses with the proper righteousness and not in the hasty style of "off we drive!" no unknown reserves in the human body would get me off the hook.

From the ensuing surge of adrenaline simmering thru my system, I realized why cliffhangers love mountains so much, yet I, personally, would not risk it every other day….

In winter, they excavated all of Professions Street. The rumors had it as if that was done for sewer construction, but it looked like a foundation pit about a kilometer long, and four to five meters deep. The chasm was randomly crossed by a thick underground telephone cable suddenly got in the open and hanging in the air across the pit, from one wall to the other. And deep down there, a bulldozer was moving earth and leveling the gravel heaps dumped by KAMAZ trucks. Only along the concrete wall of the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, there remained a meter-wide ledge with a path over the heaps and hillocks of the spoil...

With a cellophane packet in my hand, I was walking along that trail oscillating up and down when ahead of me I marked a schoolgirl who walked in the same direction. The yellow-and-gray tartan in her coat fabric, made me realize that I should not go any further; that was not my way. Fortunately, a telephone cable was sagging nearby towards the opposite wall in the pit. I stepped on it and walked without slowing down; I did not even mind the bag in my hands. Yet, after a

couple of meters, the usual story happened again – I started to doubt if I really was a tightrope walker to stride telephone cables.

> (...because of the like hesitation, Simon, handled Stone, aka Peter, instead of a leisurely walk over the water started to go down into it...)

The cable went a-jitter, shallow swings turned into the sway of growing amplitude. I shot up my arms and fell. Luckily, when in the dive, my hands grabbed onto the cable. I caught breathe for a couple of seconds, then let it go and, like a parachutist, landed on the pit bottom.

There, I leaned over the face of a prostrate prostitute in a broad-brimmed hat with red lining who stared upward past me. How come the prostitute in the snow? Why was I there? It's an easy one about the hooker, she simply slipped from the bag in the fall. And it was right I got there – my way was finished on that cable, another one was starting from that depths…

So I went along the graveled bottom of the pit to its end in the distance with the ramp for KAMAZ trucks to drive down but not at this early hour. When back on the surface, I proceeded to the station square to be in time for our bus and go to work and, after the working day, I got off our Seagull by the bus station to buy a ticket, and to run, waving it, into the already starting bus, "I have a ticket! I have a ticket!" Because Eera told me about her country trip to the Hare Pines forest so as to train her conjugal fidelity despite the champagne in the glove box. Because what else did I have to do? That's why I went to Romny…

It was completely dark and cold in Romny, but I found a hotel. The receptionist did not know where to accommodate a guest with a cellophane packet in his hands, so she allotted a room with 4 beds for me alone. Although she could combine me with that pair of business travelers that came from the same bus in my wake.

The room was a usual pencil-box for 4, empty and freshly painted over the paint coats from the previous 20 renovations. 4 thick terry towels hung from the backs of the 4 beds, and the radio on the wall was singing in thick bass a romance about the cold morning, gray morning.

I had nothing to do. I turned off the radio and the light too. Then I lay down and stared at the darkness until I fell asleep…

~ ~ ~

The morning, contrary to the forecast from the radio romances, was bright and sunny, and pretty soon I found the psychiatric hospital. I left the cellophane packet in the snowdrift on the lawn under a bared big tree and, without any luggage, entered the open gates keeping my hands visible.

When the guards got it that I was not visiting anyone but wanted to stay there myself, I was taken to a small office. A young man, who looked like a militia lieutenant, except for a white doctor's smock, asked about the reason for my coming.

"I want a certificate that I am not crazy." I knew perfectly well that by those words I had burned down all the ships and blown up all the bridges behind me, and now they would lock me up for sure.

"And who says you were crazy?"

"Well, in a streetcar, for instance."

His animation grew exponentially. He started inquiring what kind of a seal I wanted on the certificate – round, or triangle?

"It does not matter as long as it's signed."

So, he called a young doctor and an elderly nurse to take me to the shower, and then to the fifth unit. Before the shower, the nurse sheared off the hair in my groin with a hairdresser's hand-machine. I felt embarrassed, but I did not resist – a strange monastery is not the right place to barge into a-preaching your doctrine.

After the shower, the doctor took me to an interview. In order to consolidate the success, I drove a couple of fools, she only moaned lustfully while scribbling post-haste in a thick notebook. When we went out into the yard, I said that I had left a cellophane packet outside the gate. The nurse refused to believe me, but then she went off and with amazement brought it.

> (...and what was there to be surprised at? Who'd get the nerve to lift a packet left, like a bait, in front of the gaping gate to the regional psychiatric hospital?..)

The doctor frisked the cellophane and allowed me to keep it together with its contents: a copybook, a pen, and a book in English with a close-up of a woman in a wide-brimmed slouch hat in the front cover…

The fifth unit at the Romny psychiatric hospital was located on the third floor of the building constructed by the blueprints from the Stalinist times when the installed flights of steps formed a wide stairwell. Halfway up, there was an iron mesh across the well to surprise a would-be suicide with the failure of his shifty schemes. The stairs ended on the wide landing in front of the locked door in between the two long wooden benches by the sidewalls.

Behind the door, as you would normally anticipate, there started a corridor stretching to the right. It started from the window with vertical grates and, past the closed office door tableted "Head Doctor", went away to its other—blind and murky because of the distance—end with a tap and sink in the sealing wall.

In both sidewalls of the long corridor, there gaped rectangular doorways to the wardrooms, that at the first, unaccustomed, sight looked like passages to caves because of lacking any door. The light from the outside world reached the corridor after creeping transversely thru the wardrooms whose grated windows considerably decimated it. That's why, in cloudy weather, the bulbs in the

corridor were turned on all day long. That dim illumination served rather to emphasize than disperse the twilight.

Halfway to the far-off end wall, one wardroom on the left was missing, substituted with a small hall of two barred windows. In the hall corner next to the right window, a tall pier-mirror stood atop its empty cabinet, and the partition returning to the corridor from that corner had a white door with the tablet "Manipulation Room" on it. The hall's left window was blocked by a tall box, like, pedestal for a turned-off TV. The lofty pyramid was abutted by a hospital couch alongside the partition wall with the other white door in the hall, tableted "Senior Nurse", exactly opposite the manipulation room.

The floor in the corridor was paved with middle-sized ceramic tiles of a dark brownish hue conforming to the general gamma in the all-pervading twilight. The floor-tiles gleamed moistly since the privileged shut-ins washed it twice a day with wet cloths on wooden mops…

For a starter, to check how dangerous I was, they placed me to the observation wardroom, opposite the hall with the pier-mirror. At the jamb of the door-less doorway to the wardroom, there stood an armchair whose carcass of nickel-plated pipes, upholstered in brown leatherette, leaned its back against the corridor wall. The slender pipes of legs supported an elderly but sturdy mujik in the seat—a paramedic—rigged out in a white smock and a small white capulet. With one ear turned to the observation wardroom, he faced the distant parts of the corridor where another paramedic sat at another wardroom in the exactly same chair, yakking idly with a young man in the pajamas and army high boots, who squatted with his arms hung over his knees, in front of the sitter.

The paramedic took me into the wardroom, chinking on the way the bunch of keys tied to the rope-like strip of his belt against the back of the bed nearest to the doorway, where a young blonde in bright red pajamas lay with his unswerving stare stuck into the crevices in the whitewashed ceiling while hastily beating off under his sheet. The clang was upheld by a burst of sardonic laughter out of the opposite corner, but it choked abruptly.

The third bed from the window was pointed at by the paramedic's stubby finger and I humbly lay down. The bed between me and the window was occupied by a supine young man clutching the collar of his blue hospital gown tightly wrapped around his stuck out neck with closely cropped head on it, whose eyes were intensely peering upward, absorbed in watching transition of stains in the ceiling, one into another.

Soon, he turned to me an inquisitive stare from the bluish circles around his eyes and asked whether my brother's name was Sasha and if I had a sister as well. Not waiting for my response, he squeezed his head between his hands to report that he had been studying with them at the technical school before one evening his father sent him to collect cows when the hoary fog was drifting thru Podlipnoye which instilled a cold into his hatless, unprotected, head and ever since the poor nob aches regularly.

A couple of times he left his story off to holler at a nuts who approached the siderails of my bed mumbling some poorly articulated questions. Then he said that his name was also Sasha, turned away, and fell asleep.

A pair of patients without speech problems exacted from the blond in red a song, and he whined and wheezed out the latest hit from the "Mayak" radio station:

"Save, please, save, please, save, please, save my broken heart,

Find, please, find, please, find, please, find her for me..."

Two hours later, I was classified a not violent case, the senior nurse called me out from the corridor and led to Wardroom 9, closer to the office with the tablet "Head Doctor".

The 9th looked more cozy accommodating just ten beds. It's only that the white desk partly jutted from the left corner across the entrance, but since there was no door it felt like a minor inconvenience. Wildlife shrieks from neighboring wardrooms gradually grew more habitual and ceased to stir upsurges of funk by their primeval jungle force.

In the evening, along the corridor there sounded a cry "to the kitchen!" and then a group of privileged shut-ins, led by a nurse, marched to the exit. A half-hour later they returned in a hurried pace, precipitated by the weight of two huge thermos pots schlepped over in the counter direction. A few minutes later, from the remote end of the corridor, they hollered, "Workmen to dinner!"

Workmen were always called first to the dining room. Instead of pajamas, they wore black *spetzovka*s and after breakfast and midday meal, they were convoyed away somewhere.

When the workmen left the dining room, in the corridor sounded the next call, "The second party, to dinner!" And, after a corresponding period of time, the concluding call was shouted out, "The third party, to dinner!"

The left sidewall in the far end of the corridor had three locked doors: to the shower, to the dispenser, and to the dining room. Neither of them had any tablet, but everyone knew where was what.

In the shower room, they kept tin pails and wooden mops for washing the floor. Its door was opened by a nurse or a paramedic for the privileged to take their pastime instruments and locked again at once. However, despite so close control one of the fifth unit shut-ins managed to hang himself in the shower room, although not at the first go.

Before feeding the fifth unit, they unlocked both the dispenser room—to place the brought thermos pots there—and the dining room, to have where to call the eating parties to.

The dispenser room was narrowed by the large robust shelving along the wall opposite the dispenser window. The lumber shelves' load was a dozen of gaudy cellophane packets with food

belonging to the shut-ins visited by their visitors on the visiting day. Twice a week, they heralded along the corridor, "Delivery! Who has a delivery? To the dining room!" Those who knew that in the dispenser room there were things they did not manage to stove away completely during the visit of their visitors, trod to the dining room to finish the chew. If someone failed to keep in mind or rejected recollections about the cellophane packet awaiting them on the shelves, then more attentive and caring wardroom-mates would remind him and solicitously escort to the dining room to assists in eating the delivery.

I did not belong to the workmen and ate with the second party. We lined up in a noisy, diversely dressed, but equally hungry, queue along the wall by the door blocked with a paramedic's body leaned on it, while inside they were sweeping off the tables after the previous eaters. The paramedic also controlled that someone would not get in the line after having his share in the freshly fed party.

At last, he commanded, "Come on!" And we noisily barged thru the unusually narrow door into the dining room with three windows parallel to the long tables, kinda medieval refectory if not for oilcloth on the tabletops. They stood in three rows abutting two opposites walls, and the narrow cross-sectional aisle in the middle cut them into six separate tables. We sat at them, overstepping the benches screwed to the floorboards.

Amid the animated noise spiced with loose, uninhibited, gestures, we waited for the constantly on-duty blond masturbator to bring the wide plywood tray cluttered with aluminum bowls, spoons and bread slices. The tray was unloaded and those who got the *havvage* put in front of them started eating, while the rest watched the process and waited for the *chmo* dispenser, also from the shut-ins, to fill the next tray-load behind the partition with his window.

We finished everything off and began to wait for a tray with tin cups of sour-sweet kissel, whose skin I hated so much when at kindergarten.

Once I overslept the feeding and had to eat with the third party... Some grievous sight... There, people treated their faces as Plasticine, kneading out of it the most grotesque masks for no obvious purpose. But then and there I found out who produced baboon shrieks, which I heard from my wardroom, and who was answering him with the roar of a wounded elephant. There were none of conversations, even of most desultory nature, at the third party feeding.

And yet, at times, someone from the second party would mix into the third one. Not because of sincere love for living nature, but simply to use the opportunity and eat the neighbor's ration while he was making faces to the window grates. Sasha, who knew my brother Sasha, was favoring the third party and often ate with them so as to curb such funny in the head, yet crafty, freeloaders.

Those 3 meals were the noisiest time of day in the fifth unit. If someone started to make a needless noise at an unreasonable hour, a pair of paramedics ran to his wardroom and, following a rectifying blow or 2 with their bunch of keys on his head, fixed the troublemaker. That is, they crucified him, in the supine position, tying his wrists and ankles to the iron corners along his bed

spring mesh by means of yellowish cloth straps, obviously former bed-sheets worn-out to shreds…

After feeding, everyone dispersed to their wardrooms or strolled aimlessly over the brown tiles in the corridor floor. I would not say that we were starving there – same *havvage* as anywhere else. Once, each of us was even given 2 pancakes for a dinner; though being cold, they bore a drop of some sticky jam.

Another outstanding event was that incomprehensible late-night feast, when in the hall appeared 2 laundry basins brimming with sausage of two types: liver-squash and blood-mixture, and everyone might grab as much as he wanted. Except for a pair of the third party members, who suddenly grew sane enough, but the fat shut-in in charge of the basins drove them away. Discrimination happens anywhere…

Yet, the main delight in the life of the fifth unit appeared with the stately, flax-haired, nurse who brought it in a pillowcase bulging with angular pieces of refined sugar. That pillowcase she took into the "Senior Nurse" office and every day those, who had the brains to come and ask for, received a few pieces of not just pressed but a real, refined, sugar, which did not melt on your tongue in just 2 seconds.

I, for one, had brains to ask twice a day. And that sugar I tried to consume unnoticed because those too deeply troubled in their head to turn to the original source were annoyingly sane enough to beg it from me. To show that it was over, I patted at the emptied pocket, but then, recollecting that lying was not the right thing to do, I shared the sugar from the other pocket in my pajamas.

Once in 20 days a slim black-haired woman with a sharp nose and, naturally, in the white smock, came to the hall in the middle of the corridor. You could see at once that she was from the glassy-eyed, but I had already kicked that stuff and, therefore, accepted the version of the fifth unit old-timers stating that she was a former circus acrobat. The acrobat cut the stubble off our faces with a hairdresser machine, and for the haircut she used scissors if you did not ask to crop it also with the machine in "zero" style...

The cultural life was ensured by the TV set. One hour before, and one hour after the news program "Time", during which it was a break for the procedures. Some 10 watchers gathered around it dragging stools and chairs from their wardrooms. The paramedic by the observation wardroom also moved nearer…

At night, the wardrooms were lighted with the electric bulbs until the daylight. Probably, so that no one did something to himself or his neighbor. Sleeping with the light on is inconvenient because even if in your dream you were free to walk some city streets or in the wild, the inescapable presence of the bulbs was felt even there. Yet, the corridor was not lighted so too brightly for the on-duty paramedics to normally doss down in their chairs.

In the small hours, Wardroom 9 was usually visited by a young guy eager to show how dexterously he juggled a pair of boiled eggs from a delivery. Sometimes he demonstrated a

small, yet proficiently executed picture, where a stark naked male was moodily chasing a girl with only her high boots on and the triangle of Russian crown-fillet on her head. Her long taut braid flapped on the run and, in fright, she looked back at the meter-long dick of the determined pursuer. Apparently, a copy of some original from the first half of the XIX century.

Then a frail man with elusive eyes came to take the young guy away. According to his repeatedly shared story, he got to the psychiatric hospital after accidentally breaking the window panes in the *khutta* of their Village Council with a walking stick, not omitting a single glass... He kissed the youngster in his pate thru the stubble hair, called him "mnemormysh" and led him back to his wardroom. It was his habit, to kiss any young person in the pate and call him "mnemormysh".

> (...never before or later heard I that word from any one at all, in no dictionary whatsoever you'll find an entry for the unheard word, but still the gentle tenderness of its sounds makes it so lovable, soft, like, say,"pinniped pup", can you feel it, eh?—I'm serious, not kinda pulling for a fella from our side, you know, repeat any of these 2 for 10 times before shaving and you're guaranteed from cuts even if using Neva blades...)

~ ~ ~

The time for getting up was announced by paramedics jingling their key bunches against beds' side rails so that by the arrival of the head doctor and the nurses the fifth unit life would orderly flow in its channel. First of all, all flocked to the toilet.

2 / 80 = F(0)!

Two toilet bowls for 80 shut-ins are too FUCKING few(!),

so queuing to them started in the corridor. The line continued inside, closely parallel to the walls in two rooms, firstly, in the hallway, and then in the toilet itself.

In that anteroom, I once fainted for the first time in my life, absolutely for no reason whatsoever. Black darkness congested in my eyes, and rubbing my back against the wall, I slipped down to the floor and sat in nowhere. However, I did not lose my being completely and after a while, though still thru the darkness, there began to come echoes of distant voices explaining to each other that I just passed out. Then the blackout turned murky gray growing gradually lighter, then I opened my eyes and returned into the line.

For those who couldn't keep in check their excretory system any longer, a tin basin with handles was placed on the floor tiles in the center of the actual toilet room. When it got filled up full, some of the nuts would ladle the excrement with his hands into a separate pail and empty it into one of the two bowls, the remaining urine was poured out in the stub of a drainpipe in the corner.

There was some tacit time quota for squatting on the bowl, when it ran out, the nearest queue started to grumble, and a minute later some of the deaf-mute nuts, from those lining in the hallway, would yank you off the toilet bowl without explanations why...

After breakfast, the toilet was locked until the end of the midday meal, when they opened it briefly for washing the floor. The last chance to use the toilet was the half-hour following the dinner, because of the final floor washing of the day.

My rather lax attitude to the urinary matters before entering the madhouse left my bladder lacking the proper discipline to fit into that quite simplistic schedule. When feeling the urge, I lapsed into a panicking confusion – how to withstand it until the next half-hour of the open toilet? Appealing to paramedics in whose possession was the coveted key did not make sense because of their unchanging answer, "Piss off! You can't use the toilet, the floor there is washed." So to avoid a warming up, explanatory, hit over the head by the whole key bunch, you had to conform and piss off.

One day, driven to desperation, I tried to take a leak into the sink on the end wall in the corridor, and got jabbed on the ribs by the shut-in who often smoked there on the sly, admiring the sink, like, it was a park fountain on repair.

During another crisis, overcoming shame, I turned to an elderly nurse with keys on her belt, trying to delicately explain my need and plight.

For a considerable stretch, she couldn't understand my muttering about what I felt within my bladder, but then she opened the door to the shower and, indicating the drainage trap, ordered, "Puddle here!" No wonder they were named "sisters of mercy" in the Czarist army…

~ ~ ~

One time, the shut-ins were driven, in groups, to the bathhouse in another building. There, it was necessary to stand under the lukewarm shower in a slippery cast-iron bathtub, disgusting long streaks of slimy-brown rust stuck forever to the flaky enamel in its sides. While you soaped the washcloth left by the previous shower taker, the next one, naked already, pops up by the greenish eggshell of the bathtub with a remarkably intense glare at the rotten concrete in the too low ceiling while giving a twitch to his cheek of not immediately interpretable meaning... The small waffle towel got soaked before you could wipe half of yourself, and the residual moisture got absorbed by the underwear on the way back to the unit…

pops up the next to the greenish eggshell of the bathtub with a remarkably intense glare at the rotten concrete in the too low ceiling while giving a twitch to his cheek of not immediately interpretable

In the afternoon, it was better not to come too near the windows in the hall. A couple of tower cranes were seen thru the panes, slowly turning their beams at distant construction sites, and from the bus station, there came muffled announcing on PA loudspeaker about the departures of buses to indiscernible destinations and wishes of a good voyage. The sun was shining, the snow melting, life was going on out there, but you were on this side of the vertical iron bars…

Saturdays were for reception of visitors to the fifth unit, who were not allowed on any other day of the week. The harsh ringing of the doorbell in the corridor called the on-duty nurse to check

who was out there, and then they shouted along the corridor the name of a shut-in to go outside the door and see his visitors.

My parents came on the very first Saturday. I was greatly surprised because I did not tell anything to anyone when leaving for Romny. As it turned out, the following day my landlady informed them of my absence, they called SMP-615 and were told where I got off the bus the day before. At the bus station, someone also recollected seeing me, and the tangle got unraveled…

We met on the landing in front of the door to the fifth unit, one of the long benches was vacant and we got seated along it, in one row. My mother, pushed the fluffy kerchief back from the head onto her shoulders and said, "How's that, sonny?" and she started to cry,

My father, so as to calm her down and in the way of consolation, announced, “Again! Started again!" He did not take off his fur hat, and did not cry, but kept his eyes directed at the bench opposite, where another pair of parents fed all the goodies from their cellophane packet to their shut-in – a crazy guy who did not talk at all because he had been bitten by an encephalitic tick.

I also was eating all sorts of homemade cakes and buns brought by my mother, and Eclair cakes with custard filling from the cooking shop by the Under-Overpass, because she knew what I loved. There was also lard in the cellophane packet to take it with me, but I flatly refused. So, at the end of the visit, my mother handed the bag to the nurse for storing it in the dispenser room shelving. Still and all, I declined going to the dining room when they yelled from the corridor to come and eat deliveries. For the principle's sake…

On the following Saturday, my brother and sister came instead of our parents. My brother had no hat on his head, but he frowned just like our father and said, "Why, Sehryoga? It's no good you do it."

As for Natasha, she did not cry but kept upbraiding me, "Tell me just one thing – you really need it? Well done, good fellow!" She said that Eera did not come, although she phoned her so that she knew.

Eera never came to Romny, but I understood that she had to look after the baby... On March 8, they brought a gurney to the corridor with a pile of free postcards for the holiday. I filled one out to Nezhyn with congratulations and love for Eera. While writing, I was horrified by the ugly quiver in the message lines, and the handwriting was anything but mine. Probably, because of injections…

~ ~ ~

The head doctor of the fifth unit never started whim-wham discussions of my preferences in music, she was busy with curing me. I was injected with iminazine intramuscularly, 3 times a day. An initial couple of days, it still could be tolerated, but later there remained no intact spot in the buttocks. One shot got upon another, sore nodules cluttered my ass and turned it into a terrain of tightly swollen knolls, it became difficult to even walk along the corridor, leaving any orbiting

out of question. Besides, the skin down there, denied any time for regeneration, started bleeding, not too profusely but constantly, the hospital underpants soaked thru and stained the pajamas from inside.

The most unbearable was the third, concluding, injection of a day. It was shot at about 9 pm, the tinkling of the steel boxes with syringes pulled on the gurney along the corridor, made my teeth clench in a spasm. The tinkles gradually neared our wardroom, and the on-duty nurse appeared in the doorway with a syringe in her hand. Having done an injection, she returned to the corridor after another syringe for the next shut-in.

Once a nurse missed me and, so as not to remind her, I pretended to be asleep and, when the gurney tinkled away to Wardroom 8, I could not believe my own luck. An hour later, the nurse called me from the doorway, holding a syringe in her uplifted hand, she smiled victoriously, "Hoped to skip it, Ogoltsoff?"

In the manipulation room, before they started a round, those syringes were charged according to the list, and when on the gurney remained an unused syringe, she realized that someone had been missed... You remembered – well done, but why to smile?. At that moment, she reminded me of Sveta from my polygamous past; probably, by her hairstyle…

And I was also injected with insulin intravenously, but at first, the head doctor warned my parents that they should agree to that treatment. Beltyukov, a young but experienced neighbor in the wardroom, told that they extracted insulin from bull's liver, there was nowhere else to get it from. The purpose of those injections was to bring a shut-in to a coma. Many were cured that way, subtracting the percentage on whom the drug worked incorrectly. Still, the number of survivors remained higher. The tricky part was snatching the shut-in off his coma in time.

Shots of insulin were done to me and Beltyukov in the morning, one insertion in the vein inside arm elbow. Then the nurse called the nearest paramedic and he came together with volunteers from the shut-ins to fix us with rags to the iron beds we were stretched on. They fixed only our arms but firmly, so that we could not wring them away when led back out of the current coma.

After about 20 minutes, the nurse returned to the wardroom to fill out some ledger, sitting at the white desk in the corner. That's why it was placed in that improper place – she was watching us like milk on fire not to let it drip over when seething.

Beltyukov and I lay on our beds, side by side, and talked, looking up into the ceiling. He was a sociable guy and somehow resembled Vitalik from the construction battalion or, maybe, not very much so. Then our conversation turned into incoherent exclamations: Beltyukov shouted about the dominance of fucking matriarchy, and I kept proclaiming that all people were brothers and how could you possibly not see it!? Meanwhile, my head was tilting back to see my backbone, only the pillow was always in the way.

It signaled the nurse to put aside her ledger, and give us a shot of glucose intravenously to ward off the upcoming dive into the fatal phase of coma. Then they untied us and gave a glass of water with a thick sugar solution because the mouth was burning awful hot. That does not mean that

Beltyukov and I always shouted the same thing, yet such were the core themes of our slogans at uncontrolled chanting when under insulin. On Sundays, they did not inject us that shit…

The hardest to recover from was the shot of sulfur. Normally, it is injected to drunks in the form of punishment, however, the head doctor might have been having some special experimental considerations or certain optimistic hopes. She wanted to do her best, probably. It's also a shot in the rear, with the effect spreading over deep into the bone tissue. 2 days following the injection, the patient treated to it has to drag his leg because of feeling a sharp pain as if your join was finely smashed.

The shot of sulfur broke my will. Dragging the leg, I shuffled to the dining room to eat the lard from the delivery, but when the *chmo* dispenser shut-in handed me the cellophane packet, it smelled like my briefcase in the sixth grade, when I forgot to eat the ham sandwich at school, and it spent there all winter vacations. I had to throw the rotten lard away…

My relations with the fellow shut-ins were even and correct, as anywhere else, I staunchly stayed an undeclared renegade. Naturally, those derailed out of reach and submerged into the vagaries of their private worlds, did not notice me, while shut-ins capable of thinking, as far as possible, showed certain respect caused by the sympathy and compassion for my exposure to the insulin injections. Only one young guy, Podrez, for some time was fawning over me without any reason but then, in the queue to the dining room, he hit me in the stomach, I couldn't guess why.

2 minutes later, Beltyukov, in the same queue, found some fault with Podrez, pinioned him and kept immobilized. He did not say me anything, not even with his eyes, but there was no need for hinting that Podrez was fixed by him for me to jab the guy into any spot at my discretion. But I did not hit, I feel sorry for the mentally ill, notwithstanding my hurt stomach.

A far more terrible blow dealt me the loss of the book in English. On the white desk in our wardroom, there remained only the copybook with the since long finished translation and the pen stuck in between its pages. I was upset unbearably because the book was borrowed from Zhomnir, who had borrowed it from another teacher at the Department of English – the ever-smiling Nona. But when I, in that terrified state, turned to the head doctor, she, with the indefinite indifference, responded that the book would not go anywhere.

And she was right. 3 days later it was returned to me by a shut-in who collected it from the nutty kidnapper at Wardroom 7, he failed to keep it concealed any longer.

> (...I understand the thief's sentiment. At those times they did not know in the Soviet Union how to produce such glossy paperbacks for books, and all of a sudden—wow!—a gaudy close-up of a female face against the background of the fifth unit. Who would resist?..)

He did not spoil it in any way, and only the backside of the cover bore light touches of a pencil by which he tenderly poured out his adoration, slightly reminiscent of a sketch of the cerebral cortex, or whimsy curls of whirling smoke. It even might have been some formulas of the

unknown scientific language from beyond the future, only that I have given up already moving down that road…

The shut-ins were all so very different. At first sight of some of them, you could immediately see they had a yo-yo stream of consciousness if any at all, but with some other, you'd hardly say he's nuts.

In general, there were all kinds of sorts, with quite neighborly types among them, like that brunette fat man. However, one day, lying on the hospital couch in the hall, he confessed to me his murder of someone else and, usually so very cheerful, he grew at once all gloomy. Maybe it was a lie because the murderers were kept at the second unit whose paramedics were brutes accomplished and his confession was simply a day-dream like my bumping Gray off in the stoker-house of VSO-11…

Yes, there happened incurable liars around. One of them, with a fat tattoo of "Kolya" on his hand, without any invitation started convincing me that his name was Peter, and after that, he took an obvious offense at me although I had not expressed any doubts.

As for Tsyba, he amazed me by his erudition enumerating the unsuccessful suicide attempts of Hemingway until he found out that a pistol was the most steadfast means for the purpose. And before that, I listed him among the unmistakable half-nuts...

There was a seemingly normal gaffer, whose queerness you could guess only from his sentimentality, he got devastatingly hurt hearing that we all lived in a madhouse. Always. For life. The madhouse thru and thru, both indoors and outside, no difference.

"Do not say so, at least here it's a mental hospital."

Such a delicate soul…

Or, say, that mujik whom I for a long stretch considered dumb. On the contrary, he was very inquisitive, it's just that he prepared his questions all too carefully. It took him a month before he approached me and, eye to eye, asked about the sorest spot, "And your wife, was she a chaste virgin?"

Firstly, no dumb have such words in their lexicon and, secondly, I hadn't checked her ears, quoting Rabentus.

And the dumb, on hearing that, began to cry. He fell silent again dripping noiseless tears.

A rather gloomy madhouse on the whole…

~ ~ ~

However crazy, the shut-ins knew everything, and 4 days beforehand they warned me that on Friday I would be called to the commission where they decide to set me free or go on with their treatment. The commission consisted of the head physician of the psychiatric hospital, the head doctor of the fifth unit and the on-duty nurse. Afraid of saying something wrong, I was amenably falling over myself to agree with anyone, grovelling even before the nurse, "Yes, yes, of course, yes!"

The head doctor said they had prepared me for discharge, but I would only be released if some of my relatives come to pick me off.

How afraid I was that no one would come on Saturday! After all, there had been such a Saturday when I waited in vain. The whole evening after the commission I had to restrain myself so as not to burst into tears. Sobs literally clenched my throat – I would not stand another week of injections…

My parents came together, and from the landing by the door, we were summoned to the office of the head doctor who said that my treatment should be continued with iminazine pills.

My mother thanked her so very much, and my father took out the money from his jacket pocket and handed it to my mother. She came up to the head doctor and put the money into the pocket of her professional white smock, but the head doctor did not even notice it.

> (...as I learnt later, the amount was 40 rubles – the combined daily earnings of a team of 6 bricklayers. That day there were 3 discharges, so the head doctor earned my monthly payment in one morning.
>
> As they say in Konotop, it depends on what you've been trained for...)

On the bus from Romny to Konotop, my mother cautiously informed me that my things had been moved from the apartment rented under the great birch tree, back to 13 Decemberists. Though saddened by that news, I had not strength to resist…

At first, our team met me guardedly as a person returning from Romny. However, at construction sites, such attitude wears off quick enough, if by the end of a working day you neither surprised anyone with your shovel over their head nor took a dive from the fifth floor then you're like everyone else.

True, Lydda noticed that I leaned against the pallet with bricks and dozed off in the sun, while the crane was fetching another batch of mortar up, which previously never happened to me. And Grigory commented to Grynya that I was not the same, and pointed at the spanner laid by me over the niche for the electric meters on the landing: one edge 5 centimeters higher than the other.

Grynya answered that they would lap it up all the same because the niche was to be screened behind the frame around the box for the meters.

So I had to put the spanner to rights during the midday break, but before Romny I wouldn't have allowed me such a slip.

And, in general, I became more compliant. The only thing that the treatment couldn't straighten out, was my ill will at falling on all four when laying from the bridging slabs the load-wall on which they rested. Everyone did it on their all four, it's more convenient that way, and safer too. Yet, I still just hunkered when laying the brick course at levels lower my feet, in disregard of protests from my center of gravity. Vitta also at times refrained from kneeling.

(...sometimes, it's an up-hill job to get rid of the young pioneer inside you.

"Better to dive from the fourth-floor height than lay the wall standing on your knees!"..)

When I went to Nezhyn for a weekend, I took pains to keep my eyes a little squinted, otherwise, people felt creepy at my shell-shocked sight because my lower eyelids drooped as if I'd been forced to watch a documentary series about the death camps, gas chambers, and grim crematoria... I recollected the long article about *Clockwork Orange* in the monthly Moscow read in the stoker-house at the construction battalion, about how they applied the same technique to him...

Noticing a double chin that started to form under my jaw, I threw the glass container with iminazine pills (the generous gift from the fifth unit head doctor) into the drain pit in the garden at 13 Decemberists. The next day my mother spotted it there and threatened that she would report to psychiatrist Tarasenko my violation of directions from Romny.

"Mom, how can't you see it? Their pills are just a means to make me crazy."

I did not want to lose my leanness, which I always pride myself in, notwithstanding its slight stoop...

Everything became as before, or nearly so... Construction sites in Konotop, weekends in Nezhyn... The eyelids came back to their normal level canceling the need to strain the eye muscles... The translations. The poems…

Those poems started to pop up after the start of my bricklayer career at SMP-615. They were not poems at first, just unattached pieces of irrelevant phrases. Some seemed attractive with the alternating play of sounds within them, others because of inherent ambiguity, or rather being double-barreled so that they could be interpreted in different ways.

While busy with the production process, I, invisibly for my fellow-bricklayers, turned and twirled those pieces in my mind, slit-split them then re-assembled anew, then threw them out of my head to dogs, to devils, to scrap fucks, but the most persistent ones came back after the bum's rush, and French walk, and kicking-out (consecutively) to stay brazenly there as if they never

were away, not for a sec's sliver. Then there remained the only resort – to stick them with a pen down to a piece of paper and forget.

> (...in six years there gathered about 30 pieces of those unsolicited self-willed buggers in 2 languages, because each one was coming the way it fancied.
>
> Among them, there happened graphical sketches like that one copied from the landscape around a construction site: "*the apple of sky skewered with the blade of beam at sunrise...*"; or those marked by their onomatopoeic stickiness: "*Carkalomna barcarole...*"; or philosophical pieces like that about God devoured the day before; and simply rhythmic chants for marching: "*what do we laugh at*?."...)

One of the first pieces I showed Eera, and she cocked up at once – who was that Madonna in a padded workman jacket? As if I could know, just one of those queuing in the workmen canteen at the midday break.

As for "*To the Tune of V. Kosma*" she did not ask anything, it was about her, undoubtedly and clear. Later, she said that they told her it was a good poem, and I stopped showing her any of them. Probably, I was jealous of the unidentified someone, to whom she gave it for evaluation.

When I read to my brother Sasha "*The Scythian Interview*", his reaction was instantaneous, "You have to be ratted on!"

> (...if your poetry piece turns an ombre's train of thoughts in the KGB direction, it holds a worthy idea...)

Ivan, a carpenter from SMP-615, somehow liked the line about a cabbage leaf on the knife blade's edge. After 6 months, he asked to recite for him about that cabbage once again; I'd never imagine the bulky block had a sweet tooth for salads.

At times, when at the end of a midday break there still remained 5 minutes before to leave the trailer and go on with laying the walls, the women on our team asked to read something new, and the recital would be concluded by Grynya’s yell: "Sehryoga! They do not shoe horses with fire, there are horseshoes for that! Gelding you are ungroomed!" He was brought up and educated in the village of Krasnoye on the Baturin highway and should know such things better.

When the number of poems exceeded a score, my attitude to them changed qualitatively. Why should they lie around? Ain't it a pity? And I started to send them to the editorial offices of diverse monthlies and publishing houses, just like Martin Eden from the same-named novel by Jack London. And they kept returning back to me, exactly as his ones to him, with typewritten responses, which looked like one and the same carbon-copied answer.

They informed that the material received from me was inconsistent with the thematic orientation of their publication, besides, their editorial portfolio was filled for 3 to 4 upcoming years, yet not a single word about the verses themselves. Thus, Grynya's review remained unsurpassed: "Gelding ungroomed!"

However, the literary collaborator at one of the journals shared, that a similar style was the vogue in the 1930s. Probably, he aimed to point out the deprecated nature of the stuff, but it rather made me happy – they recognized poems as having some sort of style!

> (...and what a style it was! In the 1930s the Union of Writers had not been gelded yet with political purges and spy-hunting repressions. In those days people still wrote poetry and not conjuncture-prone materials dedicated to the nearing Party Congresses...)

It gradually began to dawn on me that none of the eggheads, slurping from the trough of literary collaboration, was interested in all those poetic "beam blades in the sky" any more than in prosaic skewers in their personal ass.

The final eye-opener arrived with the response from the monthly *Moscow* to "*Tired Alla*". A fleeting glance made it quite clear that the literary collaborator perused the suggested piece in the most serious and conscientious way. The meaning of a certain word in the second stanza was not quite evident for him, so he took pains to check the term with a dictionary... He forgot to erase the working marks of his assiduous pencil in my verse. The word "craving" remained underlined and its interpretation—"lust"—was added nearby.

I did not know which dictionary he used to dig it out, but the result offended me. The ultimate blow was dealt by the name of the reviewer who signed the response – Pushkin! Aw, fuck! The mental picture of Pushkin looking up "craving" in a dictionary made me draw the line under my fucking the brains of editors with my f-f..er..formidable, I mean, simplicity. I realized at last, that I was not a Martin Eden and it was anything but America around.

The realization of my non-American origin and whereabouts cut postal expenses for envelopes and registered letters. Sending such a letter was not big deal though, about 50 kopecks, the equivalent of 2 "Belomor-Canal" cigarette packs and 6 boxes of matches because the cost of living in the Soviet Union was fairly reasonable, and treatment of askew illusions, practically, free of charge…

~ ~ ~

In summer, you came to Konotop again, yet without any carriage already. Our team was working at the 50-apartment block near the Under-Overpass, and one of the riggers, Katerina it was, shouted from the ground that I had visitors. I went downstairs and to the sidewalk outside the gate.

You stood next to Eera who was wearing a red sarafan with white Mongolian patterns. I don't remember what you had on, but I do remember how lovely you were smiling... I carefully lowered my plastic helmet onto your straight fair hair, and its visor slid down to touch your nose but it failed to put out your happy smile... I remember that smile from under my helmet.

In a couple of minutes, you both went on down the sidewalk and I watched, and the riggers, Katerina and Vera Sharapova, they also watched from behind the gate, suddenly so silent and

pensive, because such beauty was going away – a woman in red, hand in hand with a child of fair straight hair.

You had just turned 3 years old, and I decided that the best gift for you would be a familiar face among the strangers at 13 Decemberists. I went to Nezhyn and, despite my tongue-tied speaking manner, did manage to convince Tonya to let her son go with me to your birthday in Konotop, provided that my father-in-law would arrive the following day and take him back. Tonya was a really brave woman, she was not afraid of my reputation, drenched beyond any hope for restoration after Romny.

The local train was overcrowded and for about an hour we had to stand in the aisle, vacant seats appeared only about the station of Bakhmuch. But how happy you and Igor turned when I brought him to 13 Decemberists! A fountain of joyful squeals!.

The following week my vacation began and 4 of us—you, Eera, I and Lenochka—went to the Seim with a permit to the RepBase recreation camp procured by my parents for us. It was a wide grounds whose low plank fence enclosed a few large Pines and several wooden cabins with 4 beds in each and windows on all the sides, like a veranda. When we first went to the river beach, everyone there got just stupefied, they never saw a Greek goddess go, moreover with so snow-white a skin as Eera's.

Another day the 4 of us went hunting mushrooms in the forest plantation nearby the village of Khutor Taransky. Halfway there, we met a pair of horses, but I worried only about Eera, she always was afraid of those animals.

The forest planting was of young Pines lined up in parallel ranks. Long spider webs stretching across the passages between the lined trees made the plantation almost impassable, but there were suillus under the Pine needles layer on the ground. We were combing thru the corridors walled with the Pine trunks, forth and back. You grew thirsty and I asked Lenochka to take you to the camp—the path was wide and it was no more than just 300 meters—because I wanted Eera all too madly.

For a long time you did not want to go with your sister before, finally, you agreed, but a moment later your loud crying rang along the Pine corridor, and Lenochka explained that you did not listen to her at all, although there were no horses anymore.

In the evening, there was a thunderstorm and downpour, but you were not afraid and only laughed because I was lying on my bed and you were stomping on my stomach. Someone's joy might hurt someone else – at your 3 years you were a weighty kid, but Eera cried out to be patient with my own child. I endured a little more and then I hardly managed to persuade you that's enough, please.

It was a good summer…

On the day of your departure, you squared up with the clothesline tied from the wicket to the porch, which certainly was not the right place for it. You took a mop and started knocking it at

the half-dried laundry hung over the rope. My mother yelled at you and darkened in the face, but you already were too big to lose your footing, and only the mop was snatched from your hands.

It was time to start for the streetcar terminal, Lenochka volunteered to take you there on the trunk of her bicycle. Eera agreed though I was against the idea. My misgivings increased when I noticed the glances exchanged by my mother and Lenochka. The most frightening about it was that they did not look at each other, but into the ground at each other's feet, while their averted eyes kept a mute dialogue:

"Sure?"

"Yes, do it!"

I do not invent, neither distort reality by wacky fantasies, which is proved by what followed the unspoken dialogue overheard by me with I don't know what.

You left, sitting on the trunk behind Lenochka. Yet, Eera and my mother were ping-ponging empty clues for one minute more, before we left going out into the street. With the bags in my hands, I hurried along leaving Eera behind.

There stayed about a hundred meters to the street corner, when I knew that I was right being so hasty because I heard your shrill scream. You stood by the fence and kept screaming. Lenochka, holding her bicycle, tried to persuade you not to cry, but you did not listen to her and just screamed on and on. The rusty iron pipe stuck up from under the ground in between you 2. The only iron pipe in the half-kilometer leg between 13 Decemberists and Streetcar 3 terminal... Everything fell into place, I got it all. Very calmly, so as not to show that I was aware, I asked Lenochka to go home, no need to see us off any farther, no, thanks.

Then Eera also came up and tried to comfort you, but you cried while walking on to the terminal because of such a big bump on your forehead... We rode by the streetcar in silence, Eera was blankly looking out the window. You sullenly sat in her lap, and I in the opposite seat, feeling crushed. How to live in a world where a grandmother blesses her granddaughter to kill another granddaughter of hers – this beautiful kid with the copper 5-kopeck coin pressed by her mother to her forehead for the bump to dissolve?. Eera was silent on the train too, and I never attempted at sharing what shouldn't be shared...

> (...now Lenochka has 2 children, beautiful daughters.
>
> You and she are strangers to each other, and no one of you remembers anything of all that, especially that pipe thanks to the mind’s conventional blessing—forgetfulness
>
> My mother, eventually, became a witness of Jehovah amassing piles of glossy eye-candy booklets for the saved or those who want to get saved. And it's only I am to blame for all what happened then but, upon my word of honor, in that recreation camp I wouldn't stand Lenochka on my stomach – she was already 9 years old...)

~ ~ ~

When I joined our team after my vacation, the pavement before the 50-apartment block was cut with a transverse trench for the tie-in to the main communications under the road on Peace Avenue. However, the carpenters of SMP-615 assembled a robust lumber bridge, wide and secure, with beam railings for the convenience of pedestrians.

I was at the trench bottom, digging, when I saw Beltyukov on the bridge. He strolled up there dressed in a dapper colonial style. I did not want to attract his attention, but he recognized me from above even in my *spetzovka* and helmet, stopped on the bridge to greet me and introduced to his mother, a lady in an aggressive neckline.

Then they went along. He was nervous and she guarding him way too closely, so that I understood the roots of his bitter resentment at the matriarchy when under the influence of insulin. And I also thought that our meeting in Romny was not his final stay in a mental hospital, that they wouldn't let him run loose for long because he was wandering up there, defenseless, controlled by so exacting mommy which would imminently bring about the next relapse. Learn from me, sonny! See? I'm below, in the trench, with my helmet on, no SOB of a paramedic buster would ever reach me here. As for my stay in the madhouse, I went there of my free will and got fed up to the ears, when they were making me wiser thru my busted ass…

Accepting another of my translations, Zhomnir, in return, handed me a thick hardback volume. It was a monograph about schizophrenia which he bought when his daughter had problems with it before she got married. Monograph means a collection of articles by different authors concerning some mutual subject. I thoroughly studied the friendly shared volume; after all, that was not boiled sausage with admixed charms to win my love.

> (...in their articles, the contributing authors considered diverse aspects of the same subject from different standpoints, each one according to their respective specializations. Thus, a chemically trained writer presents the listing of biochemical blood components in a number of notorious schizophrenics at the peak of their spiritual activity compared to the periods of relative calm in the same persons. Alas, no exacerbation of amino acids level in leukocytes was detected.
>
> Another contributor scrupulously measures anything which turns up to their measuring devices, which data showed equally indefinite results.
>
> The third one just takes a seat next to the bed with a fixed up patient and, while the aberrating fictionalist drives him a fool, he writes down some tremendously fabulous stuff. Like, he was boarding his trolley 47 awfully careful not to touch anyone and all the same there suddenly was a sand desert all around and he had just a tattered cloth round his loins, as anyone else in the pack of similarly skinny, naked, and sunburned fellers, when a band of horsemen galloped from behind a dune and started to massacre the unarmed fugitives sticking them by spears...
>
> Yet, on the whole, it's quite a useful monograph because the authors, despite the fact of their being representatives of the decaying West, had the courage of real scientists to

honestly put their hands up and acknowledge, "Okay! I do not fucking know what the fuck is this fucking schizophrenia about!"

"Try to approach her tenderly,

Look deeply in her eyes,

You'll find the treasure you have never seen!.."

Presently, despite the progress in the methods of modern research, all the finds by this particular field of science is just that nicely scientific term – "schizophrenia", everything else is wrapped in the dense mist of uncertainty.

The main trump ace, the touchstone and litmus test, provided by the science, are "the voices" which you meet in any textbook on the psychiatry. If you hear some voices and there is not a living soul around, then you are a schizophrenic. But if them those unsubstantiated voices tell you, "Save France!" then you're the hero Saint – Joan of Arc.

The only weak point in the said monograph is absence of an expert in theology. Suffice it to recall St. Inez, whose body in a jiffy got covered with long fur, so that the rapists were stripped of any chance of breaking her hirsute chastity...

They are enjoying cakes and ale in their picnic in the bed of roses, those specialists in the trade whose luminaries can't see the misty core of what they are, actually, about. To concoct a diagnosis is easier than making a fig. Pour half a glass raw schizophrenia, spice it with a pinch of double-barreled adjectives, shake the ingredients...Enjoy! "Fur-coat form of schizophrenia", the favorite drink of St. Inez!

Tamara at the fourth kilometer on the Chernigov outskirts was not in the know of all of my exploits. For the burned down plantation of cannabis, I could be easily stamped with "autodafic form of schizophrenia aggravated by Torquemada complex" to commemorate that absolutely normal inquisitor who regularly sent packs of heretics to the stake.

As for the term itself, they used (as is the tradition in producing scientific nomenclature) the words from old Greek which, when putting ancient roots together, reads "cracked mind". And now – lo! – "The mind cracked in the form of a fur coat."

So, who of us is schizophrenic after all?!. Do they think that if they don the white smocks, and trumpet a trump from the terminology they don't know a damn thing in, I will trust them more than I trusted the Ichnya sorcerer in his khaki shirt and mambo jumbo about the moon "quarters"?

Oh, my dear aesculapius-kindergarten kids! Mind you, I am from Konotop. My classmate Volodya Sherudillo could casually give out: "I cannot ignore the data of

pseudo-quasi-illusions to avoid the ultimate diffusion of my transcommunicability skills."

After the eighth grade, he went to "the seminary", aka GPTU-4, to become a turner, otherwise, by now he would be Head of the Academy of Sciences, and you would be sitting in the ante-room to his office, waiting in nervous jitters if he would admit you, the petty CEC khannoriks.

In short, while no one knows where schizophrenia comes from and where goes to, and how much is her fee for a visit, you could just as well go and f-f..er..fumble yourself against something else. I mean it, and shove all the hep-talk-blah-blah up you know where, the Settlement fellas can share a more detailed route to those in doubt…

That is to say, get along, sweethearts, keep moving...)

On the weekends in Nezhyn, the 3 of us took walks to the kindergarten in the narrow streets of the neighborhood. It did not work on Saturdays and the entire playgrounds—all those stalls and slides—were at your disposal. The swing on iron bars when set into motion gave out brief screams, shrill, heartbreaking.

Eera stood in the distance. And then you began running over the yellow leaves strewn on the ground, from me to her and back, but even that was not bringing us closer. As we returned along the same empty streets without sidewalks, I held your hand and did not take my eyes off the smooth play of round hips under the light dress of Eera walking ahead of us. It was so too clear to me that it's our last autumn together, no one told me that, but all the same, I knew it…

Tonya got an apartment for her family somewhere on Shevchenko Street. Gaina Mikhailovna was planning to rent the freed bedroom to one of the military pilots from the Airfield-Area, who were howling in the sky with their training flights each Tuesday and Friday. I was not present in any plans, and even could not be there because of Lenochka who I refused to leave in Konotop without a dad either. The impetuous spats between Eera and me abated in their fury, yet grew more frequent, which changes told me of imminent end closing in, creepily, to bring about the final moment and make me a chunk cut off clearly, completely.

(...probably, Dostoyevsky had the like feeling when they were carting him to the scaffold along the familiar streets, and he calculated by them how much time remained before the execution.

The difference was only that I did not know how many words remained to hear from Eera before her final: "Get lost to that Konotop of yours! And never show up in Nezhyn!"

Yet, I knew that I would hear it...)

When Eera voiced the words, they, strangely, brought not only pain but a speck of relief too – there remained nothing to be afraid of anymore. It is finished.

~ ~ ~

I went to Konotop and began to live a half-life. I worked with our team, read, wrote, talked, but half of me disappeared somewhere, together with the aim for which I was doing all that before I got cut off...

The dullness of half-life was somewhat alleviated by a business trip to Kiev. There, I was alone from SMP-615, and I did not know where the rest of the workers came from to the reconstruction of a dairy factory. We lived in a passenger car driven into a dead-end track in the factory grounds. They gave us bed linen yellow with age and fairly fretted, but gently soft because of that. I occupied the upper bunk in the compartment to skip folding up the mattress in the morning. Everywhere in Kiev there sounded one and the same song:

"The leaves of yellow are in a flurry o'er the city..."

And I remembered the leaves in the playgrounds of the desolate kindergarten…

On weekends, I visited the library of Kiev University, in the building on the left from the bulky monument to Taras Shevchenko. People were allowed there without any diploma, leaving their passports to the registry in the entrance lobby. In the huge and pretty quiet reading room with long tables but separate chairs for readers and separate lamps as well, under the green shaded one of them, I read John Stuart Mill's treatise "On Freedom" in the original. That's what real philosophy is! He instructed me that there are just two kinds of people:

1) law-abiding loyal subjects;

2) experimentalists.

As for all the race, class, confession and other differences, they only serve a means to split and set people against each other…

Then I found the House of Organ Music, which surely used to be a Catholic temple before. It’s in Red Army Street now, beneath the Republican Stadium. I was a little late for the concert and they had already locked the entrance, so I began to knock from outside.

The door opened and I cried as on the bus to Romny, "I have a ticket! I have a ticket!"

"Very well. But could you be quieter? The concert is on."

The hall there began right next to the entrance, without any vestibule.

"Excuse me."

But the grudger went on to murmur in resentment.

"Wanna me apologize anew?"

And he shut up because I had the time to doff my brown raincoat of the meek-geek-in-a-deep-shit cut and disclose the brazenly proletarian corduroy bob-coat from the shocking blue slice of the specter. Any not too deeply touched porter would see it was not his chance for molesting spineless intelligentsia here. Moreover, with my secret agent hat off, a strand of hair sprang like a spring stuck up from amid my pate. There was no way to suppress it, even after the shower the stubborn strand, when it got dry, cocked up again.

> (...about thirty years later, the hair style of explosion imitation became an everyday fashion. That's how gravely I was shocked by being cut off from Eera...)

So he shut up. Quite reasonably.

In the concert's first part, they played some modern atonal symphony – a tormenting screech of shredded notes from abrupt tunes smashed into sharp shards and swept up into jugged heaps... But in the second, the organ sounded the fugues of Bach…

The miracle come to pass in January... I arrived in Nezhyn to visit Zhomnir and, on a bus starting from the station, I saw Ivan Alexeyevich. He asked me how came that I had not been seen for so long.

Keeping back a sob in my throat, I replied that Eera forbade me to show up.

"Forget it! Come on, let's go!"

I still got off the bus on Shevchenko Street and later phoned from the Zhomnirs. Eera also said, yes, come. The remaining 7 bus stops to Red Partisans I rode outwardly calm but breasting the storm-churned waves of the tempest inside...

Lots of changes occurred in the months of my absence. Eera, together with you, moved to the former bedroom of Tonya's family. Her parents went over into the narrower bedroom.

The living-room was left as it was: "The Unknown Beauty" with the same contemptuous air looked from the hutch, and the rich merchant's daughter crookedly trotted from the major pinching his mustache. But in your bedroom there stood a new dressing table with a crowd of un-figure-outable but so necessary cosmetic tubes and vials. A wide yellow ring of gold lay close-by the mirror.

To my cautious inquiries, Eera said that the pier was bought by her father, and her mother presented her with the ring. And we began to live on further...

The construction site... Nezhyn... The construction site... Nezhyn...

Eera worked as a caretaker in the kindergarten 200 meters down Red Partisans Street. Her duties included registering the state of health among the kids in her group. The copybook with records in her handwriting slanted to the left, about how the kids were each day of the week, was dropped atop the dressing table.

I only once opened that copybook, and ever after I tried to not even look at it, so as not to die of jealousy. It became absolutely clear that there was no need to tread along the path of righteousness any farther, and no use escaping the inevitable because it had already happened.

> (...certain thoughts are better never to be thought at all but left alone and, if heedlessly started, they'd better be dropped and not thought down the road to their harsh conclusions...)

Shame didn't let me ask Eera of how she lived those months, or what she was doing in between my weekend visits, but when I saw in that copybook that on Thursday only half of Eera's group came to attend and even that half ill with a cold I knew that on Wednesday she had a date.

I was dying of jealousy but kept silent. Life became a kinda racing thru a maze full of stenciled warnings – don't take that turn, don't look that side, don't think that thought so as to dodge the claws and fangs of anguish…

Then Eera introduced the new order of putting you to sleep next to her on the double bed, and I was bedded on the folding bed-armchair. Sometimes she came to me in the dark, sometimes not, and then I did not sleep for long after the midnight, in the bitter pangs of jealousy...

Only once I was happy about not having a sex with her. It happened after a ride on an overcrowded bus with ice-glazed windows from the station to Red Partisans. Somewhere halfway up I suddenly felt an anus penetration. I never experienced the enema, nor probe insertion in my life, so the feeling was unfamiliar and inexplicable amid the crowd of passengers in their coats and sheepskins. After the main square, the crowd drastically thinned but I still felt as if ass-raped midst a bus-load of strap-hangers.

Exactly for that reason, I did not insist on having sex that night, because I was afraid that Eera would later have it with the fucker who had fucked me on the bus. Of course, such positioning of the cause and effect might, after all, be contrary to the actual flow of events, however, I dreaded to consider such a probability and kicked away all of the anal-sadistic speculations on that point…

~ ~ ~

End February, there was a working-day Saturday, aka "black Sabbath". Each year had 6 Saturdays of that color and not only in SMP-615. However, I firmly refused to participate and after work on Friday went to Nezhyn.

I had a lonely dinner in the kitchen because Eera told you not to disturb your daddy when he's eating, and took you away to the living room. Then I went over to the bedroom, so as not to

disturb everyone watching TV in the living room. Besides, there was no place to get seated because your aunt Vitta had come from Chernigov to stay with the parents for her vacation.

You also came to the bedroom and we grew a bit noisy, Eera came in to pacify us and make out the beds for you and me. Then she turned the light off, so that you would fall asleep sooner, and returned to the TV box because there was a replay of the New Year release of "Kinopanorama".

I stayed sitting in the dark in front of the new dressing table... I did not make any plans and everything went somehow by itself... After the sound of your breathing showed that you were fast asleep, I waited for another 5 minutes and then took you over to the folding bed-armchair. Then I undressed and lay down on the matrimonial double.

I lay for a long time with my hands under my head. The traffic along Red Partisans Street almost died out, but the noise of the rare cars became even more unbearable and so the glare of their headlights creeping over the window curtains... Poor Tonya. How could they possibly live here?.

Then I began to think about Eera and me: how could we come to live like this? Ladies first, yet for the simplicity's sake it's much easier to start with me thanks to my straightforward accountability because there left nothing in me but a mixture of insatiable hanker and jealousy, bitter and sharp. All other feelings got successfully quenched to avoid distressful pangs, but these two proved being stronger than me.

Now, what about her? At the institute, she was lucky to pull such a winning trump from the pack. All the girlfriends pined away from envy. Then the girlfriends went away to work off for their diplomas where appointed, and the trump's reputation got drenched. Here enters mummy with the gold ring: you're so young, a good man still will come round the corner, better if he were a military pilot, whose salaries far above the miserable 120 rubles.

So, what in the end? We just have what we have...that Soviet Pushkin, the sycophant of a literary collaborator, had called it lust...stupid nerd...lust comes when there is no more craving... And again there rose the snarl of a car engine coming from afar, nearer and nearer, from the Airfield-Area.

The creeping light crawls up over the curtains, arching its back, drooping forward, yes, we've found the way to smooth out the pesky wrinkle in the final phase of natural flow and dodge the snapping interruption of the ebullient passionate raptures for the sake of birth control the way like Arthur Clark's astronauts' jumps from one spaceship's lock to the other's without their spacesuits thru the void of cosmos with a side bonus of semen application for the lotions of more beneficial effect for the skin than that of mummia, ginseng, and even fabulous ojb grass because the inquisitive digressions of those loving to love their beloved lovingly will beat any Kama Sutra, I always knew that without reading a single line from it but is it worth the while?. well, I don't know... I've always loved them as they are, without acrobatics, S&M role-playing and stuff... just, "C'mon, babe, let's do us feel good"...straight thrill, you know...no frills and long live vanilla fucking…

All you need is VF!

All you need is VF!

VF is all you need!

rrata-ta-ra-ra-ta-ta

(All together now!)

All you nee...

but wait-wait-wait! how about suggestive music backdrop? mirrors in the ceiling like in those Roman poets' bedrooms... I kicked poetry already... a-and the initializing blow job, or finalizing for that matter... ready to go without?.. well, it's a game for 2 after all, whatever baby wants, she should get...as a noble self-made gentleman, I can't withhold her pleasures, eh?…

Here's another car's wailing… they are just wrenching your soul out when passing by... Poor Tonya, how could they live here?.

Then thru the door to the living room, there came the voices wishing goodnight each other. Eera entered the bedroom. In the light of the streetlamp behind the window tulle curtain, she picked the needed vial up from the bevy by the dressing table mirror and went out again. The unyielding hardon made me tense and strained.

It took a long time before she returned and closed the door, then she bent over you on the bed-armchair to check if I was asleep. You slept like an innocent baby and never woke up at what followed.

Eera lay by my side under the blanket, felt with her hand my shoulder, abruptly recoiled, and cried out, "You?! Get out of here!"

"Come on, quiet..."

"Dad!"

SHE CALLED FOR HELP TO GET PROTECTED FROM ME

I did not touch her, I just lay on my side with my arm bent at the elbow to prop my jaw in the capped hand above the pillow and idly watched, like a beach-goer estimating with an imperturbable air how many bathers were there in the water. Oddly, I became a complete outsider, a listless on-looker because everything somehow turned all the same to me.

Evenly, with unconcerned calmness, I pronounced, "I'm fed up with you."

Said I that? No! Not true! Not fed up! It's not me!

And yet it was I who uttered the words, which were the part of the ritual. What ritual?!. It made no difference because I did not care anymore.

Still leaning my head against my hand, I held out the other one and weakly slapped its palm against the soft cheek.

I?! Cuffed her?! Of course, not. It was not a slap, it was a part of the ritual.

She turned speechless from astonishment, but it was too late. I dropped back upon the pillow and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

The switch clicked, in the raw light from the ceiling, her parents and sister crowded in the doorway. She jumped out of the bed and joined the flock. Vitta started to emit the traditional screams of a family squabble. Ivan Alexeyevich in his pajamas stood with his head bowed.

I saw how difficult it was for him to make the decision. Or take it. What if I was stark naked? Before his princedom harem? But there was nothing I could do to help him. My role was that of an on-looker. Finally, he made a decisive step, even 2, grabbed my hand sticking from under the blanket, and pulled me out. The catch plumped onto the frayed rug spread on the floor. The blanket remained atop the bed.

I stayed sprawled down there while my mother-in-law was reading Prayers at the Departure of the Soul to declare how hugely shameless I was to lay prostrate before the ladies in such an undressed state. Underpants and a tank-top may be decent sportswear for jogging in the morning, but not in the presence of your mother-in-law.

I silently got up and, quite unexpectedly even for myself, made a deep bow to shake off the non-existent dust from the hair below my knees. A ritual makes us follow its canon even if we have no idea what ritual it is.

"We shall renounce the old world of tyrants,

We shall shake off its ashes from out feet!.."

I dressed and went out into the hallway. The mother-in-law followed. To make sure I would not foray into the refrigerator? She was replaced by Eera, alerted, keeping mum. I gave her one ruble and asked to pass it to Vitta, who lent me the sum a week earlier. She nodded. I took a piece of paper out of my briefcase and wrote a note to Vitta with gratitude for the ruble. Even the grave fails to correct a graphomaniac…

The night was quiet and windless. I spent it standing at the nearest bus stop, the way I was standing in front of a ticket office in the Odessa airport locked for the midday break. Only now there were no roses in my hand.

"The Sun was never any match for you,

Brother Rain,

That is true from any point of view,

Brother Rain.

Twining in the dates too rare,

Stuck in love and black despair,

Shedding diamond tears in vain,

Tears of ecstasy and pain

Stop your crying, get away, Brother Rain..."

It was a quiet, indifferent, midwinter, night... In all that night 3 cars passed the bus stop, one of them a Volga. I did not care. Numbness of the senses.

In the one-story building opposite, the light went on and, soon after, off, twice during the night; should be an elderly person going to the toilet and back. In the dark gray twilight, the first bus appeared from the Airfield-Area and took me to the station…

~ ~ ~

At half-past seven, I got off the local train in Konotop. I do not know where I spent the following hour because when I came to the 50-apartment block the black Saturday was in full swing. The growling bulldozer in the shroud of the blueish mist of smoke from its exhaust pipe, was burying itself in the hill of earth it moved in the middle of the would-be yard. Grynya and Lydda had already changed into their *spetzovka*s and padded jackets. "You did not go to Nezhyn?" Lydda asked.

"No."

I took a sheet of paper from my briefcase with the report to the trade-union committee about spending 3 rubles to visit a patient in hospital.

> (...my current public position was visiting SMP-615 employees when they got to hospital, and comfort them with a delivery and for each such occasion the trade-union committee granted exactly 3 rubles.
>
> Though visiting ill colleagues solo, I had later to present reports on spending the amount of 3 rubles signed by no less than 3 persons because the sum was serious...)

I put the paper on the side of a concrete pipe, 1.5 meters in diameter and 1.5 meters long, and they signed it without reading. "And now?" asked Grynya, "Are you changing or what?"

My stance to black Saturdays was always firmly negative but what else had I to do? I changed into the work clothes, took my shovel and went to scrape the upshot truck-dump with the mortar stuck to its insides, replacing Vera Sharapova. She was sharp and since long noticed that so was my way to drive off my jealousy fits…

At night, back to 13 Decemberists, I was lying prostrate in the unfolded bed-armchair amid the pitch-black darkness in the living room.

Lying all the time on your back is tiring. I wanted to change position and turn over, but I did not allow myself to stir because I needed to become inconspicuous, yet movements might betray your location. When motionless, I kinda became a part to the bottom of a boundless ocean, nothing but that oceanic immensity remained in all empty world. To become a part to such absolute void, you should keep smooth and streamlined and make no rips, so that nothing would cling to you and just go on floating its way. But what enormous emptiness!

> (...there is a no direr curse than the old folk curse "emptied be it for to you!"
>
> The purpose of any loss is to make you feel emptied, deprived, drained, devoid of...
>
> Love comes to us as a protecting reaction to the endless void rotations of the life's mill-wheel, its returns to the starting point as empty as it left it.
>
> Love comes as defense from despair, when you're empty of an idea what to do about the useless flukey gift—your life—when you find no means to kill off the eternity measured out to you. When you feel at loose ends, when you have nothing to live for except the aimless living on.
>
> Love comes to free from empty search, brings meaning into your life – to serve! points the direction – to serve!
>
> Love is selfless, self-denying slavery and zealous service to the object of love – a two-legged mammal, or a collection of stamps, or… doesn't matter… it depends on how lucky you were...
>
> And suddenly, a kinda bolt from the blue, the fetters shattered, you're told, "Off with you! Enjoy your freedom!" And you find yourself in the void where there is no purpose, no sense, where you have to just live, like a crystal, like a blade of grass, like a rain-worm.
>
> ***We are not slaves, slaves are not we!***

> No! I want back! To where love was… it would fence from the horror of facing the emptiness, would give meaning to the senseless repetitive fuss.
>
> Love will be the one to make decisions. I will obediently execute the orders!.
>
> Love is the sand where to bury your freaked out ostrich head...
>
> Damn you, love! How empty it feels without you!..)

Surviving in vacated vapid void is not a trivial problem. Of course, there is always a choice. Why survive if you can stop the torment at any moment? However, never in my life had I even played with the thought of suicide, not formatted that way. Well, and since there was no choice, I had to solve the problem.

There is just one and only solution – systematicy. Nothing else can serve to overcome emptiness. Whether you're systematically jamming vodka, or systematically jogging in the park does not matter much as long as you keep maintaining a certain cycle…

Luckily, I already had some investments that provided certain means for spanning the void. The five-day workweek, that's for one. My participation in SMP-615 public life – two. And also, visits to Nezhyn for intellectual communication with Zhomnir, once in 2 or 3 months. Who would ask for more?

Any system, so that to work, would need some sort of a carrot to tip for spinning the wheel, to reward for successful conclusion its vicious circle, to stimulate diving into the next, exactly same, rotation.

On Thursdays, I visited the bathhouse with 2 tours into the steam room. Bars of soap and sauna whisker, aka a bunch of dried birch twigs for self-whipping midst the burning hot steam, were on sale at the bathhouse ticket office on the first floor. Leaving the bathhouse, I left those instruments of pleasure on the gray marble tops of low tables in the common washing hall on the second floor, taking home only the changed underwear for the subsequent laundry.

On my way from the bathhouse to the place of residence, I consumed 2 bottles of Zhigulevskoye beer and bought an issue of *Morning Star* from the news stall in Peace Square, for reading with a dictionary until next Thursday.

On Mondays, I did washing in a tin basin on the bench in the yard, in winter the washing was done in the summer-room section of the shed.

The ironing day depended on the weather conditions around the clothesline, which was stretched from the porch to the shed and not to the wicket anymore; better late, than never.

Weekends were harder to fill, but once a month in Peace Movie Theater they showed another of action movies starring Belmondo, or a comedy with Pierre Richard.

Summer Sundays were no problem at all, I spent them on the Seim beach lying on the pink, with red circles, cover for wrapping babies. That very one which on weekdays was spread over the tabletop when ironing the dry laundry. That cover stayed at 13 Decemberists after one of your earlier visits there. It was rather short and my legs, in part, stayed outstretched over the bare sand, but who cares?

3 times a Sunday, I had a swim for the buoys, where there were no screaming bathers. I lay on my back over the water, with my arms and legs wide apart, and pronounced the self-made ritual formula,

> ***"Oh, water! Ran into each corner of mine!***
>
> ***We be of one blood – thou and me."***

> (...to assemble such a phrase I had to involve Fitzgerald and Kipling in collaboration, but they did not mind my plagiarism...)

Then I swam back to the screams and splashes, got out the water to the coverlet to lie down and turn from side to side in the scorching hot sun, at times reading *Morning Star*. On the beach, I read it without a dictionary, underlining the words which later had to be written out in a copybook.

At the midday-meal time, I left the beach and went to the store in the nearby village of Khutor Taransky. It was a casual *khutta* under a thatched roof, but with a thick iron strap fixed across the door with a weighty padlock.

Store Manager, an elderly burly squaw, who prided herself on having seen even Sakhalin Island, unlocked the door for just one hour. When she dropped the iron strap on the porch, the door opened into a room with 2 dust-covered windows in the same wall with the door and wide, two-tier, shelves running along the remaining three walls, above the 3 wooden counters.

I systematically bought one item of canned food, a pack of cookies and a bottle of lemonade. After opening the victuals with the opener borrowed from Store Manager, I took the meal out to the empty street of 4 silent *khutta*s and deep sand in the road, sizzling from the heat. There, next to an old crooked Elm, I sat on the wide bench of a cracked but mighty board turned gray by the years of exposure to the whims of weather going its unchanging season circles around the tree over the bench by the thatched *khutta* of the store.

The assortment of things on the store shelves never changed. Buying a can of "Tourist's Breakfast", I saw that next Sunday I would have "Sprats in Tomato Sauce" for the meal, and a week later "Zucchini Squash". The can with the sticker "Adjika" instilled obscure apprehension because I kinda heard somewhere that it was bitterer than even wasabi, yet it was still a month away. Maybe, I'd combine it with the small jar of cherry jam from the following shelf, eh? Will make a complex dinner.

In the end, I wiped the aluminum spoon with the wrapper from the finished off cookies, and hid the spoon at the back of the *khutta*, in the thatched straw over the blind wall, the way Anti-Soviet *kulak* bandits were hiding their barrel-sawed shotguns... Even Marcello Mastroianni hardly could have dreams of so sweet "Dolce Vita"...

And right in that *khutta*, I bought a doll for your birthday present. There were only 2 dolls on the shelves – a girl and a monkey, both of rubber. Each one had a tiny squeaker in its back to make a sound when squeezed. The pair of motorcyclists, who somehow managed to overcome the deep scorching sand in the road on that day, advised me to but the monkey, but I preferred the girl, as I had been planning all previous Sundays, in a bright dress—also of rubber—to her knees.

I could buy a present from Department Store in the city, of course, but all the toys there were made of plastic. Besides, I wanted it to be a gift from that enchanted *khutta* with its cool shade, kinda sanctuary amid the summer heat…

~ ~ ~

Although I am not sure if any system would save me without adding our team to it. This isn't meant to say that the team members surrounded each other with caring attention, tenderness and moral support. Like hell, they would! In our team, as anywhere else, they were all too glad to have a good laugh at your expense. And everyone had a family and kids of their own, as an outlet for their tender care. Except for ruddy, pug-nosed, Peter Kyrpa, handled Kyrpanos, but eventually, he also got lassoed, and corralled, and broken in as a family man by Raya, from the team of plasterers. And yet, from 8 am to 5 pm our team, even with each one distracted by their personal problems and concerns, became one family. For all the hole-picking jokes in each other's qualities, you wouldn't become a victim of a detrimental practical joke like piercing your brains by stench of smoldering wool, or any other injury-prone idiocy.

Did bricklayers use taboo words in ladies' presence? Both yes and no. I have never heard a four-letter word addressed to any woman on our team. Never. But when the crane operator puts a pallet of bricks on your foot, you report it to the whole world—and very loudly too—without paying much attention if there were ladies around.

Were women on a bricklayer team using taboo words? Both no and yes. At the moment charged with trauma threat or loss of life, they'd rather shout "Oy! Mamma!" or issue shrill incoherent shrieks. Whereas at the intervals between shoveling mortar into the boxes for bricklayers, or rigging the brick pallets with the prickly steel cables, Katerina could casually share the folklore song:

"Fuck yourself, you fucking dumbos,

you're more stupid than they said,

No way to marry your daughter?

Go fuck her in my stead!.."

I have to admit, that mute replaying this particular obstreperous folklore piece in the brain convolutions of my inner self sometimes worked as a painkilling palliative.

But, after all, is the foul language the only thing to frown at in the world? The bricklayer Lyoubov Andreyevna once complained to the head engineer, who accidentally dropped in at the construction site, about the insulting words of our foreman Mykola Khizhnyak, by which he identified all women indiscriminately: "Inside-out insoles!" Up to now, I haven't got the slightest idea what it could possibly mean, but she somehow got hurt. Probably, because she was the most beautiful woman on our team, only sad at times.

It is sad for a woman to know she's beautiful and, at the same time, not to know what to do with her beauty and just watch how it flows away in vain.

She had a husband five years younger than her. Before their marriage, he was walking around with a knife hidden in the top of his high boot, and she made of him an exemplary family man and a safe member of society. But she still remained sad, especially in winter frosts, when the mortar in the boxes would develop a centimeter thick ice crust while climbing thru the air to the seizure line. "Oy, Mamma! How my poor little hands did get numb with the cold!"

And that parasite Sehryoga would readily respond from the other end of the line, "Serves you good! Your mummy-daddy kept telling 'study well, sweetheart, so as to become an accountant!' And what was your answer? 'No! The shovel is my one and only love forever!' So shut up now and love it until you get dark blue!"

"Parasite!"

Anna Andreyevna was not as beautiful as Lyoubov Andreyevna, but she was kind, especially after the break for the midday meal. She, as most of the team, lived in At-Seven-Winds and went home for the midday break. There, she would accompany her meal with a couple of shots and return to the workplace softened and kindhearted. Her only drawback that she was hunting my brick hammer. The moment my vigilance got slacken, she'd snatch my brick hammer and bury it in the wall covering with mortar. Most bricklayers cut bricks with their trowels but I, for righteousness sake, did it with the hammer…

Lydda's and Vitta's husbands were SMP-615 employees as well. They were locksmiths at the production building in the base grounds, under the supervision of the chief mechanic. As any locksmiths, they, naturally, were drinking. And the following morning in the bricklayers' trailer you had for one half-hour to listen to curses to those busters who even were not anywhere around.

Although the curses from Lydda were a treat to hear, she sang them out like a song, with Vitta's backing in the background.

Vitta herself was not eloquent. When we were finishing off the uppermost part of the walls on the 110-apartment block, for the final bridging with roof slabs, she was next to me in the line of

the bricklayers, and, when I jumped out over the wall, all she could say after disappearing me was: "Sehrguey! Where to?"

The brick courses in my part of the seizure needed jointing so I jumped outside onto the concrete awning over a balcony on the fifth floor. But she had no idea about that awning! Now, a man dives from the roof of a five-story building and all she's up to saying is: "Sehrguey! Where to?" Here's, in a nutshell, the female logic, and knowledge of physics – down, of course, I've jumped! Where else?.

Our team was young. The oldest bricklayer on our team, forty-year-old Grigory Grigoryevich, put it directly, "We're still young!"

He possessed exceptional pedagogic skills and, noticing that his son, a ninth-grader, somewhere on a streetcar, or the sidewalk, was gaping at a woman worthy of looking at, he never missed the chance of seizing the opportunity: "Wanna get you some of that sort? Study well, buster!"

His face was round in unmistakably Napoleonic way because of the thin hair strand stuck to his forehead. And he was a solid, burly man. More than once, I tried to overtake him in laying a brick course – no go. He would finish when I still had to lay about ten bricks or so.

And he was very judicious. Only once his common-sense gave in. That time he brought to the construction site his double-barreled hunting rifle, after the midday break.

The site was in "no man's but builders' land" at the frontier of At-Seven-Winds. And then a young construction superintendent Sereda stopped by coming from SMP-615 base grounds.

Grigory Grigoryevich allowed him also to hold the weapon. He even started an argument that Sereda would not ever hit his hat thrown up into the air. We went round the end wall of the unfinished building. It was the white silence all around, and only the trees in a distant windbreak belt contrasted the snow with their black trunks.

And he threw his hat up—high, so high!—and Sereda waited for a second and pulled the trigger. The hat twitched in its flight and fell like a hit bird. Grigory Grigoryevich raised it and there was a hole in the hat top, 2 fingers easily ran thru. The buckshot turned out to be too large, meant for boars. But it had been a good hat, you know, of nutria fur. It's only he did not consider logically that Sereda was from Transcarpathia and although there remained no Bandera men already, yet the firearms survived, hence the skills…

And the rigger Vera Sharapova was never sad. She was singing all the time, laughing and ready to keep up a talk with anyone at a moment's notice. And she also was the most beautiful, but only at work, while dressed in her workman padded jacket and *spetzovka* pants. But when she changed to go by the local train to her Kukolka station, the beauty disappeared somewhere.

I do not know why it made me sad when she was telling about her wedding party and everyone around laughed along with her.

"The kids a-crying, Peter a-playing!"

Peter was that humpback mujik who took her even with 2 children of her own. He also was an itinerant from Kukolka to Konotop and knew how to play the accordion. Some noisy wedding it turned out.

Vera Sharapova was keen and nimble, and she noticed that when someone complained of having a headache, I would take out a handkerchief from my *spetzovka* pants pocket and turn it inside out. At times, she would nudge Katerina, say—watch the miracles of my training!—then press her hand to her forehead and make a pain-ridden face, "Oh, what a headache I have!"

Naturally, I saw thru all that comedy, yet, nonetheless, executed my role in the procedure. However, when Katerina also started to rub her temples, I would say that the reception is over – the facility serves 1 patient per day. Harry Potter had not been conceived as of yet…

Peter Lysoon not always was a bricklayer. Earlier in his career, he had the job of a security in railway gold transportation. There was a special squad of armed securities to accompany safes in luggage cars.

They had long trips, sometimes for weeks. The floor of the car swayed to the clang of wheel pairs on the rail joints, and thoughts of all sorts were spinning on and on. Say, what way, for example, that gold could be taken?

One day they were spinning, another day – sometimes for weeks at a stretch. But no spinning could bring an answer to that insoluble problem. He would take a look at the faces of his fellow-securities: they were also thoughtful. And what about?

And then fear started to creep in – what if some of them had thought out a working solution? Readied a plan, found accomplices and, at some point in the endless way, he would trash all the squad with one clip and leave with the gold? Peter got tired of waiting and became a bricklayer…

By his skinny, short, stature, Grynya somehow made me think of German general Guderian, whom I never saw in my life. Yet, was there in his appearance something vaguely suggestive of the General Stuff and, perceptibly, that of the Wehrmacht. On weekends, he took rest from blitzkriegs and went on fishing trips with Grigory Grigoryevich, everywhere in the reach of local and diesel trains. They were fishing with fishing rods of different lengths, longer ones in the summertime, shorties for ice fishing...

I was bribed by his faith in my healing talent. That time he stopped me on the flight of stairs leading straight into the open heaven because of absence any roof yet.

"Sehryoga, help!" And, lifting his upper lip, he showed a whitish pimple on the gum. Then he unfastened the safety pin from the inside pocket of his workman padded jacket, where he kept his wristwatch during working hours, and handed it to me, "Pierce the bitch, it smarts too much."

I started excuses that it was not possible there amid the dust, dirt, and stuff, without antiseptics because such kind of operation called for disinfection.

"What disinfection do you want of me here?"

Well, in action movies, they usually disinfect things on open fire... He held the pin tip over a lit match. The result did not comfort me though, the tip got covered with black soot.

Grynya critically examined the pin, wiped the soot off against the incrustations of brick dust and other sediments over the sleeve of his padded jacket, and held it out to me, "Take! Do it!" And I shut up because the man did his best to provide disinfection…

Mykola Khizhnyak arrived in Konotop as those dark-haired, curly, heroes of French novels, who come to Paris with a couple of sous in their pocket and ambitious plans to conquer the capital.

True, he had a three-ruble bill and, instead of a slouch hat with a feather, there was a forage cap on his head, incapable to protect in the thirty-degree frost on the night of his arrival.

He had not become Captain of musketeers, but he is the only bricklayer of the sixth category known to me. In that capacity, he had an apartment, a motorcycle URAL without the sidecar, and his wife Katerina whom, whenever having problems at falling asleep at once, he could grab by her ears and pull under... And it was Mykola Khizhnyak making up for the knowledge I omitted at the institute.

When studying at the English Department of the NGPI, I could not force myself to read a single work by Thomas Hardy, although he was in the examination questions. I don't even know why, maybe some unhealthy allusions called forth by his innocent Saxon name, but I somehow had an incompatibility with the guy's works, I dunno. I knew, that it was necessary, but I couldn't...

Once on the stack of slabs that 2 of us were checking with a measuring tape, Mykola began to tell me a long and winding story. At first, I thought it was some TV series and only at the very end, when the pursuit overtook her, but she was asleep from fatigue, and he told them let her sleep a bit while she did not know she was caught, I realized that it was *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, notwithstanding that Khizhnyak had woven some flight ticket into the plot…

But officially, the most beautiful woman on our team was the rigger Katerina. Vera Sharapova never hesitated to say it to her directly, even though she knew it herself, especially since she was the foreman's wife, though not registered, so what? But they already had a seventh-grader son from her first marriage.

On her short yellow curls, Katerina wore a scarf of red gossamer, and on her neck a necklace of massive red beads, to suit the color of the lipstick on her lips. Somewhere in the stacks of bridging slabs, nearby the heap of dumped mortar, she kept a triangular fragment of a thick mirror to look into, in her spare time.

She considered herself as beautiful as Anfisa from the TV series "The Ugryum River" after she became the vision because of whom Gromov flung himself off the cliff. In any case, it was with that spook gesture that she beckoned to me from the brick debris, scattered on the ground, when I was laying the corner of the fourth floor, the morning after that particular sequel: "Come on, Proshka! Come to me!"

Or, maybe, she just wanted to check if I was crazy enough for the dive. After all, it was clear that the one was not all there and even turned away from live porn...

That time two couples desired to have sex in the bosom of nature, and they left the city for a distance of 2 hundred meters from the city limit by At-Seven-Winds. They used the strip of the bush as a screen from the highway. Pissing with passion, they did not take into account the close-by construction site, and our team put their hand tools aside and exchanged expert comments during the combined action, like the Romans in the stands of Coliseum, when it did not yet require major repairs.

> (...in the stagnation era in our land the totalizator was not known yet, so there were no betting on which of the mating pairs will cum first...)

But how offensively relative is everything in this world! You come first and Anna Andreyevna, seated upon her shovel handle, thrown across the iron box with mortar, would disdainfully utter: "Phui! And that's your best?"

And only the one that's not all there turned away, sat low by the brick pallet, and stared in the opposite direction at the distant group of Birches in the middle of "no man's but builders' land", as tall as the trees in the African Savannah. A normal one wouldn't behave like that…

Before his marriage, Peter Kyrpa lived with his mother, and in the winter season kept bragging regularly how on the morning of that day, he went out into their *khutta*'s corridor-hallway, broke the ice in the bucket with a tin mug, and drank the water so cold that it was entering the teeth.

I liked him less than anyone else on our team, but it became him who helped me to prove to everyone and, moreover, to myself that I was a true bricklayer. It happened much later, when the fresh blood in the form of 2 girls, who graduated a vocational school someplace in Western Ukraine, and the former paratrooper Vovka joined our team. At that time, we were finishing the second floor of the machine shop floor building, opposite the round-the-clock canteen for the teams of locomotive drivers.

When the brick wall is laid 1.2 meters tall, it is continued from trestles put close by it. Between Kyrpa and me there were 2 such trestles, which accounts for a distance of about 15 meters.

He wanted to show off before the pair of young girls in freshly black padded jackets, who often used in their talk the funny-sounding "yoy!" So he yelled, "Here, Sehryoga!"

And he hurled a brick hammer in my direction over the pallets and boxes in between us 2. The tool flew like a tomahawk spinning around its hilt. I did not have time for calculations and I did

not calculate anything. I just stepped forward and raised my right hand and the moment as the hammer handle smacked my palm, all there remained to do was to squeeze my fingers in a grab. Everything turned out all by itself.

When seeing that I did not duck behind the brick pallet to dodge his throw, but stood instead holding the hammer in my hand proudly aloft, that turncoat Kyrpa flip-flopped at once and declared to the girls who suddenly turned mum, "See? So are the bricklayers on our team!"

That’s why I do have what to be proud of in my life…

~ ~ ~

In addition to the rubber doll from the village store, I collected a whole set of gifts for your birthday. There were those glossy plastic what-you-call-them, which electricians insert into the junction boxes. They looked like little ninja turtles, although before the production of that cartoon there remained more than 20 years, for which reason you couldn't determine that they were ninjas, yet the similarity of those bits of plastic to turtles was evident at once.

Besides, there were white ceramic checkers as well. Every item in the set had a double, except for the doll.

> (...it's, like, a soldier at the front line collecting a present from shot cartridges. However, our team was indeed at the forefront of the world mastered by humans. Birthday presents from the edge of the ecumene...)

It was important for me to get to Nezhyn at a fitting time when no one would intercept and spoil the celebration day. The local train from Konotop, moreover on your birthday, was too easy to ambush with the “it” in a black-and-white tartan and then a slight swishing touch against my jeans would be enough to derail everything. It was wiser to approach from the rear, where I could not be expected from.

The bus Kharkov-Chernigov suited the purpose ideally, but it passed Konotop at five-thirty in the morning. That's why I did not go to bed that night, so as not to oversleep. I was just walking about Konotop in different directions.

When I walked along the concrete wall of the Meat-Packing Plant, there was a crowd of cattle driven thru the roofed gallery up there, to the slaughter work floor. With what human voices they were screaming! Worse than in "The Western Corridor". And they absolutely got it – where they were driving them and why...

About midnight, I was at the Kandeebynno lakes and decided to take a swim. I stripped down and entered the water in the altogether. And who would see? The dark currant bushes on the shore, or the stars and the moon? They had seen more than that. So I plunged ahead. And the darkness around was vibrating with the grunts of mating frogs...

One plasterer, an elderly female, though sporting long taut braids, told me how she was going to commit suicide in her village on the night of this very kind, and the air was filled with the buzz of insisting whisper, "Come on! Here it is, the pond! Go into!" But I did not have any voices, only the frogs.

And then I swam towards the moon. It had just risen over the fish lakes and didn't have time to grow small in the sky. The huge full moon a sliver up from the horizon.

I swam with sidestroke, soundlessly, but still pushed waves ahead of me. Smooth evenly rounded waves, like those lines printed in the handkerchief with the sailboat. Only there they were blue on white and here it was thin silver lines against the black darkness. Besides, these lines were moving, like the waves of ether, until pondweed by the opposite bank began to cling to my feet. It felt scary, all slimy mermaids came on thought, and I returned, swimming on my back so that to watch the moon all the time.

My hair was wet after the swim, and I slowly strolled to the station so that it would dry on the way. At the station, there were huge clocks on the front and back walls of the building, and 2 more inside, in the halls. That's why I went to the station.

I did not have a watch, when I tried to wear one or another on my wrist it would stop in a couple of days, or they started to show the wrong time and should be taken to repair, or replaced with a new one...

Along the way, I remembered that unfortunate guy from the Arab Nights fairy tales, who shed tears all the time and kept tearing the clothes on his chest because he loved a beautiful sorceress, and she loved him too but warned that a certain door in her palace should never be opened, yet he opened it—out of pure curiosity—and got into another dimension with only sand and stones around, and no way back. So, all that remained for him was to cry and beat himself in the chest…

About 2 years before that, I went with Eera to the Desna River. Just 2 of us, she and I. Gaina Mikhailovna was keeping you on that day.

We went there by the morning bus of Chernigov destination. But how would we come back? Come on, something would turn up... When I saw the Desna thru the bus window, I asked the driver to pull up and we got off to the roadside. Then we were going over a field. In another field nearby, women in white kerchiefs were raking hay into mounds, from afar you could not make out what century you were in.

Then I carried Eera on my back over a channel to a long spit of sand overgrown with wide green leaves past which the enchanted Desna flowed calmly. We spread a blanket over the leaves and spent all day there.

When I had to take a leak, I swam to the other bank, the river was not too wide there. Eera strictly warned me not to drench my head. I remembered that and, all the same, I could not help

plunging headlong from the bluffy opposite bank. And now all that was left to me was to cry and tear that T-shirt of blue acetate silk on my chest…

The rest of that night I spent sitting in the square between the station and the first platform. The benches there were not very comfortable, lacking the backrests. Seated on one of them, I met rare night trains together with the trolleys of the on-duty workers from the luggage office, into which the workers of postal cars threw out boxes and bales of parcels. And from that same bench, I was seeing off the groups of passengers yawning from the night chill. Have a good trip!.

When the black box in the front wall of the station lit up 05:00, I walked to the waiting hall to collect the cardboard box with the birthday presents from the automatic storage cell and went from there to the bus station. It's close by, almost immediately behind the Loony park...

The Kharkov-Chernigov bus did not pass thru Nezhyn, but from the turn of the highway, nearby the round building of the traffic police post, there again turned up something, so that about 9 in the morning I was already in Nezhyn. At that hour, the local train from Konotop was only approaching Bakhmuch. But I did not want to be a bolt from the blue, that's why I called Eera at her workplace from a payphone booth.

What a beautiful voice she had! So mellow, so dear. I said that I wanted to see you and give a birthday present, and she answered that, yes, of course, and that you were at home with her mother.

I went to Red Partisans with a joyous tide in my chest because Eera on the phone sounded quite friendly, and even somehow pleased.

The door did not open, only the peephole darkened momentarily, then brightened up again. I pushed the doorbell button once more, but this time shorter, and I heard footsteps cautiously departing from the hallway. I also heard your voice complaining about something from the doorway to the living room, and how your grandmother was shushing you in a whisper.

If a person has voices from a psychiatry textbook, they tell him something. I couldn't make out any words but thru the door I could see—and very clearly—you, a four-year-old kid, anxiously looking up at your grandma – who's there? Gray Wolf? Bad Unclie? And I also saw Eera's mother in the six-month perm-wave, with her finger pressed to her lips, "Shush!"

I am not of those who kick into a locked door, and I did not want to scare you any further. I rang to the opposite door on the landing and it opened.

There lived a pair of teachers at the NGPI. Groza-husband, he taught scientific Communism, and Groza-wife, who was teaching me German in my second year of study there.

I left the birthday box with the Grozas and asked to hand it to you personally. As for coming back to Konotop, I could already use a local train. What's the difference? Just 1 ruble 10 kopecks…

~ ~ ~

(...an attempt to live a righteous life results in developing a bad habit by the person. Not a detrimental one but, at any rate, meaningless – you fall in the rut of that business and keep on even knowing that that makes no difference...)

After the final and even ritually confirmed break-up with Eera, giving back *The Godfather*—the last of the books I had stolen—had no sense, but it was too late because I kinda got addicted. The reason why the book tarried by my side was that I did not know where Vitya Kononevich went to work off for his diploma, but then I learnt that the actual owner of the book was Sasha Nesteryouk from whom Vitya borrowed it.

I had to go to Nezhyn again... However, at the address, provided by Vasya Kropin, Sasha Nesteryouk was no more and the place was already rented to a married young couple. The young man wore a white tank-shirt, his wife a dressing gown, and the apartment richly smelled of grease smoked herring.

What else would you need for happiness, but a separate apartment and a young woman at any time of day?. When they proposed the address of their landlady who, possibly, knew where Sasha Nesteryouk moved, I turned it down and dropped any further search because I remembered that in the last year at the institute Igor Recoon, my course-mate from Konotop, became bosom friends with Nesteryouk. So it would be easier to give the book to Igor and let him pass it instead of me. Anyway, I felt fed up with the path of righteousness.

On the train back, I for the first time was visited by the thought – maybe just so it was necessary? A woman of your own, of course, is a good thing, whichever way you turn it, but why then I did not envy the young lodger? And what was the reason for the odd, ticklish, laughter seizing me at fleeting recollections of the bliss accentuated by the herring, a white tank-top, and stuff?.

Igor's mother said that he was not home and that he worked on the first floor in the building of the City Party Committee.

The building itself was by Peace Square, behind the gray monument to Lenin where once stood the tower of the city television studio before it was dismantled. At the entrance to the City Party Committee, I answered the militiaman which room and to whom I was going, and he let me pass.

The room was empty, but the moment I idly walked up to the window, Igor got in, obviously unwilling to let me see the view outside. He had not changed at all. The same glasses of tea color in a golden frame, and the same smirk under the sharp nose. Only in his demeanor there appeared the air of condescending; clear enough though in a man who got in the tracks of a wide road to a brighter future.

The Godfather hardly surprised Igor, and he promised to pass the book to Sasha Nesteryouk... Probably, it's nice to feel superior to someone who you were looking up to when being a young entrant to the NGPI with your school certificate received just a month before, while that someone had served already in the army. But now the ex-superior was slavering at a construction site, and

you had an office in the City Party Committee, albeit having to share the office room with another functionary…

We never met again, yet I was in time to catch a glimpse thru the window in his career-spring-board office and to see the strip of the cracked asphalt in the blind area under the wall, the sun-killed lawn, and the facade plaster "coat" on the blank opposite wall in the opaque gray whitewashing and... nothing else. To whichever heights he was to rise in his future career of a cadre, he'd never see that group of tall Birches among the construction sites of At-Seven-Winds that looked like slender trees in the summer haze of African Savannah. Even if you were pointing at them, he would not see…

~ ~ ~

Still, I was persistently harassed by a sticky hope because when Eera talked to me on the phone her voice seemed so joyful. What if?. And it was none of her fault that my mother-in-law decided to expose me before you as a brutal door-kicker. She certainly had not even consulted Eera, whose voice sounded like my Eera's voice…

To assert those hopes, I went to the Intercity Telephone Station, next to the main post-office. The glass door and walls cut off and left behind me the clang of the streetcars and the everyday fuss in front of the Department Store on the square's opposite side.

The woman behind the glass partition over the counter wrote down the city and the number I was calling. She passed the receipt to me, and I paid for a three-minute talk. Taking off the receiver from the phone on her desk, she told someone to give Nezhyn, 4-59-83.

I slipped the receipt into a hip pocket of my jeans and became one of the few waiting. When somewhere in another city someone was picking the receiver up, they were told that it was Konotop online, and the black loudspeaker in the station hall shouted in a female voice which booth to enter for a talk with that city. Behind the glass inserted in the door of the indicated booth, a light bulb lit up revealing a narrow compartment squeezed in between yellow chipboard plates. The expectant walked into the said booth with the phone on a small plywood shelf in the corner, next to the high stool with the crimson-plush covered seat. I did not know whether the stool was soft or hard, I had never sat down...

"Alma-Ata! The number does not answer! What will you do?"

"Repeat!" From the loudspeaker floated up a distant echoing of long telephone rings in the faraway Alma-Ata.

"Petrozavodsk! Cabin 12!"

What they were talking about was not heard in the station hall, unless they started to shout because of a faulty connection.

"Alma-Ata! The number does not answer! What will you do?"

"Take off!" The person of unfeasible expectations returned the receipt and got their money back.

"Nezhyn's online!"

I entered the booth and left the station hall behind my back and behind the glass in the upper half of the closed door. It's very difficult to talk with your heart throbbing pit-a-pat up inside your throat.

"Call Eera, please."

"Who's talking?"

"Sehrguey Ogoltsoff."

"Now..."

"Yes."

And the throb broke off at once, killed by the permafrost chill in her voice. I said hello, was saying something else, but I heard that I could never get thru that dead, adamant, ice.

"Look, I'm not asking for anything, but the girl needs a father."

"Do not worry, she's got a father already."

"Yes?. It's...good." The conversation was over.

I went directly to the exit but when in the glazed cage of its vestibule, I looked back at the booth where the light had already gone out. And I said to myself: "Look well, it's number 7. See? That number means your getting crucified…"

~ ~ ~

There are miles upon miles upon miles and three time zones between the UK and Konotop, but —lo and behold!—because of that faraway kingdom, or rather because of that kingdom's communists and, reaching the very core, because of their *Morning Star* newspaper, I missed the wedding of my sister Natasha that summer. After all, if you consider things carefully, it's because of *Morning Star* that I landed into the madhouse once again.

> (...because of the daily reading the news that half-month before was the latest news in the United Kingdom, you begin to sympathize with the Labor movement, and the names of Michael Foote and Tony Benn become not so empty sounds as the names of Suslov, or Podgorny, or whoever else was among the members of that Political Bureau of their Central Committee of the CPSU.

The head of the British government, Margaret Thatcher ceases to be "Dear Mrs. Margaret Thatcher!" as announced by Leonid Brezhnev scrutinizing the lines in the sheet of his welcome speech and playing for time with triple senile smooches on every other word written for him to read out. She becomes that bitchy iron twat who starved to death 29 Irish lads because of their wish to wear sweaters in their prison cells.

That is, there is a shift towards an inadequate perception of the surrounding realities. You start to behave like a miner from Kent County or a public utility worker in the city of Manchester.

Of course, I could defend myself bringing in my lack of awareness because, after all, I lived in the era of stagnation and did not ever suspect it. However, this is a weak excuse, because equally ignorant of the fact was the KGB officer, who answered the phone call from SMP-615...)

At the height of summer, when the annual battle for the harvest was unfolding in the boundless fields of our great Motherland, when the miners of Kuzbass region promised to give out the millionth ton of black gold in the current year, when he, the aforesaid KGB officer, still could not make up his mind whether to go on Saturday to his dacha in the Zholdaky village or rather have a ride to the Desna river, from where for the second week at a stretch already mujiks were coming back with a good catch...

Shattering the summer softness of lazy contemplation, the telephone on his desk buzzed to give out the message less welcome than a spare prick at a wedding. Emergency Situation. Strike and sit-in at SMP-615.

How many strikers?

One.

Where exactly?

On the porch of the administrative building.

"Do nothing before the arrival of our operatives."

Yes, I was sitting on the wide concrete two-step porch of the two-story administrative building.

Yes, it was a strike, because at 10 in the morning, instead of chinking my trowel against the bricks, I changed in our team trailer amid At-Seven-Winds and showed up at the base of SMP-615.

Yes, it was a sit-in strike and, so as to be seated with more comfort, I took a wooden chair from the check-entrance house at the gate and schlepped it onto the porch of the administrative building.

It was a classic summer day, in the blue sky a huge puffy mass of a solitary, brightly white, cumulus hung anchored over the production building, sending no shade to the vast sun-smitten yard. The gray fence of concrete panels couldn't hide the tall railway embankment, along which express trains flew with hasty knock-knocking past the mortar unit, giving way to solidly pounding cars of endless freight trains getting on in both directions.

It was a casual busy day, and only I did nothing but sweating in that blue shirt of acetate silk which is the same crap as nylon, just a little softer.

I was sitting a little bit aside from the entrance, so as not to accidentally obstruct the way to rarely passing employees of SMP-615.

Two locksmiths, the husbands of Lydda and Vitta from our team, stopped by to ask why I was here and not at work. Without a word of explanations, I pointed with my thumb at the board for pointers in labor performance of glossy brown linoleum, placed on the same porch, but on the other side from the entrance. And the chief mechanic guessed himself to read it carefully…

The pointers board, normally, was hung for life in the lobby on the first floor, next to the shut up window out of which once a month we received our payment. And year after year, the board chastely guarded the intact virginity of its linoleum, although a piece of chalk was put on the lower plank in its frame... That day the board's star hour pealed and out it went and stood there covered with the pompous handwriting from which, without any graphology, anyone could right away see a graphomaniac:

> Our trade-union boss is a liar!
>
> Down with Slaushevsky!

I knew, if that had happened somewhere in England, the younger representatives from both factions of the Labor Party would have already been portrayed standing next to the board, and the reporters of that same *Morning Star* would have already interviewed me: what's caused so a militant intolerance towards the trade-union leader? Until that morning, I also had only sympathy for him.

The foreman of carpenters, Anatoly Slaushevsky, had a pleasant countenance below the milky gray hair on his head. In Hollywood, he would have easily made a career in the line of a noble sheriff in various Westerns. But we too kept noble looks in high esteem, and Slaushevsky was year after year elected the chairman of the trade-union committee of SMP-615. It was a no-charge position, so he also lived on just his monthly payment. Like everyone else. And he thought that I would understand him, like everyone else, when he told me on the site that morning, "No go."

"How's that 'no go'?"

"Just so that no go."

Never, in the most horrible nightmares, ever dreamed he of being accosted with the unknown, yet obviously defamatory name of "boss"—white on brown—accompanied by aggravating demand to put him in an unusual position.

Sympathy is a short-living thing. A month before I would readily give him a hug when he told me there was a permit to the Artek pioneer camp.

Yes, I wanted it, sure thing! All my pioneer childhood I dreamed of visiting the sunny Artek on the Crimean coast. Now I, naturally, did not fit there by my age anymore, but Lenochka would be happy to see the Black Sea...

In fact, Lenochka got a little scared and began to ask her grandmother, who responded that Artek was very good. And Lenochka had already passed all the doctors from the children polyclinic with their medical checks. She even made her choice which suitcase she would take with her for keeping her things in Artek.

"No go."

A month before Slaushevsky did not yet know that someone else would guess that Artek was very good. That's why he offered to me that free permit paid for by the trade-union. And it did not matter that the smart late-comer, to whom some manager from SMP-615 boasted about having such a permit, was from another organization. Anyway, his position in his organization was higher than that of a bricklayer.

"No go."

If you live on just your monthly payment, you must think rationally. As everyone else. Grunt, scratch in the back of your neck, say "fuck!" and go back to your workplace. What's the use of showing your horns to Slaushevsky? He's also like everyone else…

I knew exactly how all that would evolve in England, but I had no idea what would happen next here, in my native land. So, my role was that of an on-looker in acetate silks, only I had to unfasten a couple of buttons, the day was too darn hot...

Round the white-brick corner of the administrative building slowly floated a white Volga. It made a loose turnabout over the fine dust in the road surface and pulled up in front of the porch with its nose to where it had come from. The driver got out, leaving two passengers in the back seat, climbed the porch, read the 2 lines on the linoleum in the monthly pointers of labor performance board and, without ever looking at me, entered the building. He soon returned, got back into the car and his 2 burly passengers came out of it and approached me.

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

It's inconvenient to talk turning your face up in two directions. I got up and put my hand on the back of the chair, "Okay, I'll just take the chair back."

"They'll take it without you."

And the 2 of them instantly gripped my biceps – each one from his side with both hands. Gently and slowly they led me towards the Volga.

At a distance, the monitor group of 2 locksmiths and one welder stood watching from the shade in the doorway to the production building, a lost and found preparatory sketch by Repin for his famous "The Arrest of a Propagandist".

The archangel on the left, responding to my meek compliance, loosened his grip a little. He already, like, just strolled along comradely embracing my arm with his palms.

I shouted to the driver, "The one on my left is shirking!" The grips from both sides immediately hardened and soon the 3 of us were sitting in the back seat, with me in the center. Like, a f-f..er..I mean, festive king on the coronation day.

While Svaitsikha was opening the gate—the first and last time that I saw it locked—I shouted to her to take back from the porch the chair I had borrowed from her workplace. And the Volga drove to Konotop.

After some other gate, they told me to get over into a small UAZ van with no windows in the back. One of the burly guys got in with me, the vehicle revved ahead but soon we stopped again. Thru the opening to the driver cab and the following windshield, there were seen the Poplars nearby the City Medical Center.

After a prolonged wait, the back door swung open. On the sidewalk stood the psychiatrist Tarasenko. "Yes, it's him." After those his words, the door slammed shut again and I was taken to Romny. Without any voluntariness on my part…

~ ~ ~

Your looks depend on how favorable is the disposition of the mirror you are looking in. I noticed it more than once. In some mirror – wow! I'm really gorgeous! While in another – is that ghoul I?

The most in-love-with-me mirror I had ever met, was the pier-glass in the hall of the fifth unit of the regional psychiatric hospital in the city of Romny. It showed me what a terrific handsome man I was, after all. And without any cinematic sweetness – just a comely man and that's it.

In those three months in Odessa, I looked like Konkin, or he was made up to look like me when starring in "No way to change the meeting point". And it did not matter much, who's like who, the main thing that there, from the pier-glass, at me was looking a man of unusual, for the

stereotyped standards, handsomeness by the Titian's brush. The red pajamas in pin-thin yellow stripes, brown soft hair slightly lightened by their sunburn, but the main advantage was the color of the eyes. Some singular, inimitable, color – that of melting honey.

And let Captain Pissak, composing my verbal portrait in front of the ranks of the First Company, say, "Look at his eyes! They are lynx eyes!" But no, Captain, the pier-glass would not lie – they were good!

The only pity was that no one saw it except me. The hall was empty, and the corridor was quiet. A dozen shut-ins stayed in the observation wardroom and all the rest of the fifth unit for the entire daylight hours were kept—with the break for a midday meal—in the Area.

It's summer, after all!.

When, in the Experimental Unit by the Repair Work Shop at the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, we, the Unit's locksmiths, in the end of working day were awaiting for the final, most slow-go, concluding, half-hour to expire and, leaning our backs against the vices, were yakking of this and that though, in general, of nothing, some younger locksmiths agreed that it would be nice to get back to the army again, but only now, already knowing what's what and, surely, not for the full hitch of 2 years, but, like, for a week, or 2, or maybe for a month...

To me, a soon-to-be draftee, such conversation seemed unconvincing, yet now I'm ready to agree, that the same phenomena might have more than one and rather different appearances.

At first sight, thru the roundly perplexed eyes, things look one way, but when you watch them from the height of the accumulated experience, they acquire quite a different aspect. And 1 month is just a trifle. They do not lock you up for less than 45 days in the madhouse. 45 days is half of a season: half the summer, or half the spring, or whenever they pinched you and made a shut-in.

As a regular at the fifth unit, I knew that already as well as some other nuances, however, I hadn't yet been there in summer. For me, as an unmitigated recidivist, they no longer cared to spend expensive insulin. That time I was not treated there, but getting punished with iminazine. 3 executions per day multiplied by 45; I knew what mess they would turn my ass into in the subsequent half-season... And, as a cheaper patient, I was placed in a larger wardroom, Number 8. The more the number of sick people spending the night around, the higher chances for hearing their screams from their nightmares, or witnessing a showdown lighted by the inexorable electric bulbs.

> (...every summer has its drawbacks and, first of all, the influx. Any resident of any resort would agree – on the arrival of those crowds, the standard of living takes a nosedive...)

In summer, the fifth unit served, on average, 40 patients more than in other seasons. To provide everyone with a place to sleep, in Wardroom 8, for example, 2 side-by-side beds served to

accommodate from 3 to 4 men a night, depending on how lucky you were. In that half-season, I was lucky both ways.

But there was a huge "but!" – summertime removed the problem of the washed and, therefore, locked toilet because we spent all day in the Area. The Area was a square 40 by 40 meters. The 3 sides of its perimeter, including the one with the wicket in it, presented a robust fence of rough gray boards 2.2 meters tall, nailed vertically side by side. The fourth side was a sturdy 2-meter-tall iron mesh fixed to the concrete stakes. Alongside the fence in the base of the square, there stretched a thirty-meter-long canopy with its low gable roof of rusty tin propped by few and far between pillars of red brick.

Scores of broken iron beds randomly piled on each other formed one high heap rusting in the canopy's shade. 2, still usable, ones stood close-by the heap's slope, both covered with a cloth blanket over the spring mesh. When the syringes with midday injections were brought down to the Area, the shut-ins, called by their names, were coming to the blanketed beds to pull their pants down, lie with their backs up, and get their dosage into, one by one.

A pair of armchairs on rusting legs, with their leatherette cover in tatters, were leaned, to prevent collapsing, against the brick pillars – they were the seats of paramedics. At the far end of the canopy, nearby the mesh fence, there stood a couple of short plywood benches with perpendicularly upright backs like those in school desks.

Parallel to the fence opposite the square base, three long, separate, boards were nailed to short stumps sticking from the ground to form 3 consecutive backrestless benches. 3 benches of the same design stretched along the third board fence with the entrance wicket in it.

The iron-mesh side in the square, opposite the entrance, had nothing for sitting nearby, but close to it—in the right upper corner of the Area—there stood toilet of the *sorteer* type: a box of three rotting tin walls under the equally rusty tin roof. The box's door was missing for paramedics to make sure that the shut-in inside was not attempting suicide, or otherwise abusing the facility.

The ground surface in the Area was bare and firm, with an admixture of fine clay dust trampled out of it... And that's all?

No! There were as many as 2 "but!" more – the strip of not trampled, green, grass along the outer side of the mesh fence, and the summer sky with white clouds above anything and everything else.

~ ~ ~

The sun was rising from behind the fifth unit's building and the shadow, thrown back by the roof, started its imperceptible march from the iron mesh to the opposite lumber fence with the entrance wicket in it. While we were taken to the midday meal, the shadow crawled over the fence and we did not find it anymore after the break, and the sun in the sky was still steadily moving on – to the construction site of a one-story building, about 6 meters off the iron mesh fence, and even farther over the site until it disappeared altogether, and the clearly delineated

evening shadow started creeping up the wall of the fifth unit, right up to its roof, where it would dissolve in the dusk of approaching night, which meant that now they would take us up to the unit for the end-day meal, injections, and overnight.

But before that, all of us had our feet washed in the vestibule, of course, on the first floor. All 120 people, in turn, would step, one after another, into one and the same tin basin filled with one and the same water. 2 nuts, kneeling on the floor behind the basin, would wipe all their feet, in turn, with one and the same pair of wafer towels drenched thru and thru. Those proceedings had an unmistakable biblical air about them, like, the New Testament feet ablution for the queuing apostles, sort of. Probably, the illusion appeared on account of the measly illumination by the bulb somewhere up in the staircase well…

I met about 10 familiar faces. Tsyba, on the very first evening, hastily approached me in the corridor, gave a brief glance and turned away, "Eew! Not the same!" And he never wanted to communicate with me anymore.

Sasha, who knew my brother Sasha, remained sporting close-cropped hair, but he was asleep all the time. In the morning, after our joyful barging in thru the wicket into the Area, he stretched on the bed for injections and only by the middle of the day, without waking up, he conceded a part of it for laying—in turn, with their backs up—of those whose execution syringes were brought down from the manipulation room…

The first one-and-a-half hour in the Area, I usually spent laying on one of the board-benches along the upper side of the square. Behind the fence, there was the area of the fourth unit, whose powerful howling and squealing in no way was less intensive than by us.

Sometimes, I had someone from the slightly inflated standing above me, and muttering to himself it was unfair I had taken up so much space for me alone. Then I had to lower my stumps on the ground and sit up because I could not send him to the 3 board-benches alongside the fence with the entrance wicket in it – that was the grounds of the fully emancipated gymnosophists.

Those communicated with screams, while being cooked in their own juice of free life, inattentive that the skin of their bare bodies, fried in the sun day after day, became cracked and oozing blood, which, eventually, got baked up though... Now, the leader of the community where no one cared about anyone else, bored with the monotony of his swinging back and forth in a seated position, issues a Tarzan howl and plunges for a couple of meters deep into the Area, only for to come back to the board-bench and go on with his swinging. On the way, he kicks off a philosopher of the same well-burned, ceramic hue, who was squatting close to the ground and drawing with his finger on the dust underneath his dangling balls.

"Noli turbare circulos meos!”

Next time, the leader with a single blow will knock another naked neighbor clear away from the bench, who'd never notice that, engulfed in spinning in his fingers a sixteen-centimeter piece of a broken twig and keeping on his own counsel, already on the ground, as serenely as before the passing thunderclap.

The paramedics never intervened into the internal affairs on the benches of the deeply introvert as long as the howl-squeal-screaming in their free territories did not bypass the notch of a permissible level. When it was transgressed, the paramedics, assisted by the volunteers from halfnuts or fully nuts, would pull the stark naked nuts raging at the board-benches and fix him onto the second usable bed by the scrap-metal heap under the canopy...

When the heat drove me away from the Area, I got seated on one of the plywood benches ignored by the crazy public because of their merciless backrests. To spend the whole day on a firm horizontal plane was not an easy task, in the evening you did not know which of your buttocks to use for sitting.

The Area itself was in the state of seething motion: back and forth, to and fro, circles, jerky tags... Where to? Where from? After what?

Along the board fence behind the board benches on which I lay in the morning, there lined a row of backs of replacing each other bozos stuck to the gaps between the nailed boards. Someone giggled into the gap, another one beckoned a fellow-patient, someone else beat off within his not removed pants because the fourth unit kept shut-ins of the opposite sex entertaining similar sorts of mental inclinations, up to the state of stark naked gymnosophists.

These are just my assumptions though because I never approached the gaps in the fence and had seen only one of our neighborixes. Black-haired and skinny, about 30 years old, she emerged topless over the fence, and with a ballet sway of her arm threw a large creamy flower into the dust under our feet. The nuts kicked up a skirmish over her flower, and she was sharply pulled away from the other side of the fence, yet and all, the breasts were beautifully shaped…

3 times a day, so as to stretch my buttocks, hardened by the shots, I left the shade of the canopy and walked around the Area in wide circles. While promenading, I memorized by rote the lines of *The Novel- Cartoon*, conceived by me still in the wild, but having taken its final shape already at the funny farm.

The content did not exceed one page of text, and it was important for me not to lose a single coma, and prevent substitution of words for their synonyms, because I was arrested without a pencil and paper on me.

The Novel- Cartoon

Maybe, the energy applied for the action was somewhat too much, yet a failure and another try at turning the handle down would cost a dent to the self-respect and bringing nearer to the end.

The warm dense dusk wrapped him behind the door. He doffed the cloak onto a horizontal rod and made between black silhouettes of solid tables and mighty seats for a blurred spot of light in the distance. The spot enclosed the face and hands of a woman at knitting.

– Hello,– said he,– a glass of juice and a sandwich.

The woman shuffled the snack and collected the payment.

He landed at a nearby table, cast a glance around, and started chewing.

– So, what's the latest news in your beautiful town?

– Aren't you local?

– Me? I'm omni-local.

– What's that?

– Means a local any place you get to.

– Well, not much by us. Nothing new…

...over the town stadium hangs the stench of raw shit from the intestines of Christian martyrs torn apart on that day by the talons of beasts to entertain the public…

– Just never happens a thing…

...in the central square whiffs of a breeze play with the ashes of heretics burned by the good Christians...

– Each day all's the same…

...in the greens a bunch of aristocratic youth whip by their canes the body of a peasant lass they presently cluster-raped, gaze at welts and bursting slits in bleeding skin...

– Same yesterday, same today…

...a dozen of peasant lads, swaying bayonets on their rifles, drive a freaked out herd of aristocrats to the nearest gully after the town limit…

– Every day alike the other…

...in the sidewalk a blonde with black briefcase catches on a pair in unisex jeans, in a sec her black cape wile brush under the right one's knee...

– What news can be here at all…

...above the sandbox in the kindergarten playgrounds a flying pan of Cassiopeans and a fight-pod of Anti-Worldies rush at each other in the front attack...

– An enviable lot, as befits people you live,– concluded he downing the glass.– In good and peace.

One time, too deeply immersed in the punctuation of unwritten lines, I inadvertently crossed the invisible borderline alongside the benches of the absolutely free till 2 or 3 rapid punches on the body and into my head brought me back to the surrounding reality…

I could not allow that reality to break my system of survival in the void and therefore, on Sundays, I went to the beach. For that purpose I dragged two plywood benches out from under the tin-roofed canopy to the mesh fence—away from those cooped-up yet still too free—and all day long I was sunbathing there, with breaks for the midday meal and when they called me to share the bed with sleeping Sasha, and get my syringe in the butt.

Uncompromisingly, I lay there all Sunday, with my eyes closed under the hot sun, and the surrounding soundtrack noise accurately reproduced the shriek-and-squeals on a crowded summer beach...

On admission to the fifth unit, instead of underpants, they gave me long johns with strips for tying them to the ankles. However hard I tried, I couldn't roll the rigging up above my knees. I had to surrender in the end, and on the plywood-bench beach, I pulled them off and wrapped my loins with the tank top.

One Sunday, the head doctor was on duty herself and got utterly shocked by the frivolity of my costume.

"And this is a person with higher education!", indignantly exclaimed she from the shade beneath the canopy.

How could she figure out at that distance that there was nothing under the tank top but me in the altogether? Deductively, the rhyme-riddle for kids about "A and B" and the rule of thumb helped her out: If the pajamas put under the head, and the blood-smeared long johns drape the back of the bench – which letter is hidden under the tank top codpiece?.

The day after she drenched my reputation by spilling that compromising stuff, I was approached by Tarattoon, from the new wave of shut-ins. He invited me to collaborate in the creation of a nuclear bomb, for which purpose they had already formed a reliable working group.

And I said, thank you, yet, said I, such a task called for the nuclei splitting, and I was fed up with even a fleeting thought of breaking, breakers and so on down that road... He never repeated the invitation…

Among the paramedics there also popped up new faces. The man of short stature with a beautiful head of crisp red chevelure and the broken right leg, for example. Or, maybe, it just was shorter, but he was heavily falling on that side.

The other one was a slender black-haired youth in an immaculately white doctor’s smock. He was the only one to call me with the plural "You", and planning to enter a medical institute in Leningrad.

In the meantime, he gave me injections above my pulled down pants and long johns and—so as to comfort me—he kept complaining sympathetically that there simply no place was left to stab into, that's why it's bleeding so.

One evening, when we, hurraying and banzaiing, came back after the day in the Area, that naked sunburned bodybuilder pressed all of his front (dirty with the dust stuck to his sweat) against the "Manipulation Room" door in the hall by the observation wardroom. The paramedic youth, so as to prevent staining his snow-white smock, drove him away with high kicks of his black shiny shoes.

"Just think of it! Now the door has to be washed!" Shared he his indignation.

That moment I seemed to understand the naked introvert – to press your sun-smitten body to such a clean, coolness emanating, door… even if locked…

Once upon a time, H. G. Wells wrote his novel *The Sleeper Awakes*... The skinhead sleeper Sasha woke up on the bed under the canopy and, without opening his eyes, pronounced, "What a ridiculous name he has – Tarattoon!" A second later the paramedic's yells added to the customary noise in the Area... I turned my head.

Snapping the iron mesh, Tarattoon flew over its two-meter height and disappeared behind the nearby construction site. The paramedic, falling on his right leg, ran up to the mesh, yet he had brains enough to figure out that even trying was of no use.

He doffed his white smock, passed it to his partner paramedic and left. Soon, another paramedic came to fill his place in the tattered armchair.

The Area was in the excited state until late in the evening, they even stopped masturbating. Before the rite of feet washing, the redhead cripple entered the Area, pleased like an elephant about his catching that bastard!

We went up to the unit floor and some of us visited the sixth wardroom, where Tarattoon was already lying on his bed, fixed and pacified by the shot of sulfur.

Dragging on the cigarette butt which one of the halfnuts kept in front of his lips, he spoke softly. He fled to the outskirts of the city and hid in the bushes of a deep ravine, no one saw him there, there were no *khutta*s around. How could that red-haired bastard have found him at all?

> (...and I felt melancholic sadness about white spots in psychology books as of yet. While they got stuck and making a muck out of schizophrenia with their monographs and insulin, what fascinating horizons of incomprehensible human capabilities are unfolding around!

How did sleeping Sasha learn about Tarattoon's flying the coop a few seconds before its actualization?

What led the redhead to the right ravine and to that very bush behind which the fugitive got frozen sitting on his haunches?

There’s a hell of a lot of questions that I won't find answers to. Never... And others don't care about them at all...)

~ ~ ~

That tall, emaciated, black-haired young man stood out among the representatives of the new wave by the expression of normality in his thoughtful face, yet he got easily aroused at mere words. Once, he started talking about some fascists all too ready to walk over dead bodies so that to reach their fascist ends.

I responded with a conversational shrug, "The end justifies the means." It was an unwise observation because he interpreted my casual remark as an attempt at justifying those unspecified fascists and flared up immensely. Still, I was not hit for that clumsy clue.

Incidentally, he also was a construction worker and brought to the fifth unit at 8 o'clock in the evening, directly from the construction site.

"Your team work two shifts?"

"No, we finish at 5, I went there just to plan work for the next day."

Oh, sweetie! You did come to the workplace after five, eh? They're right – your place's in the coop!.

Ah! Yes! There was also music in the Area! It was being made by a shut-in with a button accordion.

The repertoire comprised 2 or 3 songs: "Walking the Don river...", "You're a cop, I'm a thief…", and… and that's all, I think.

The performance of those pieces began in the morning with an interval of an hour. The interval grew shorter and shorter and in the twilight, the numbers were already rolling one after another, and again, and again.

That way he achieved perfect virtuosity at performance, to which in the evening was also added singing without too rude deviations out of key. With those two songs, the accordionist was bringing the Area to an ecstatically orgiastic state, transforming by the evening all of us into a single organism, where each organ did what it was supposed to do.

Some sang along in chorus, others danced enthusiastically, even the absolutely free under their ceramic sun-cracked tan began to squeak somehow in time. I saw an elderly female paramedic, succumbing to the general ecstasy, she also danced and shouted amid the circle of halfnuts under the yellow light from a bulb in the summer twilight... That's not to say that such euphoria could be registered every evening, but it happened.

Then the accordion player got discharged because his forty-five-day stretch was over. For 2 days something was somehow amiss in the Area. But suddenly, after a break for the midday meal, with a smile of certain embarrassment in his face, the musician popped up in the wicket because earlier in the morning he put on his necktie and ventured to the city executive committee to point out to them their crying mistakes at managing affairs in the city of Romny…

Ivan Corol, which means "king" in English, would have remained quite normal but the name, eventually, brought megalomania about and here he landed among us, one of us, but with royally conceited manners.

He was not patronizing the gaps in the fence to the fourth unit, he was a gourmet. Louis le Roi Soleil. He lay in ambush for the female plasterers from the nearby construction site to go out on the porch in their mortar splattered *spetzovka*s. Then he entered the three-wall box of the tin toilet and, watching thru the holes in the tin pierced by erratic nails, he commenced to hastily sweep his palm along his dick—back and forth—standing in profile to the rest of the courtiers in the Area. Some refined example for the sovereign subjects, eh?. On having it away, he left the Versailles with the royally ceremonial, albeit exhausted, gait.

One of the plasterers took a brush for whitewashing, put it on the porch and started to cut its end with an ax, like, to make it even or, maybe, just so, in retaliation.

A male voice cut thru the jungle cacophony in the Area: "Put a plank under! Making the ax blunt against concrete, you fool!"

She dropped her jaw, never expecting instructions from that side; she thought there were only ceramic ones.

It's just that I don't like when they spoil instruments. Probably, that's a hereditary idiosyncrasy…

> (...as of yet, I have only outlined the external contours of the Area, the shell of it. But what is its essence? What is the point, if any, in all that chaotically turbulent movement or, on the contrary, in the frozen motionlessness not giving a fuck for anything? Does it exist? Certainly, yes.
>
> The boiling bouillon chaos of the soup, both from messy lightheaded ingredients and motionless vegetables at the bottom, is nothing else but a cross-section of the component parts and the current state of the human race. The question "how tasty is it?"

does not belong here. So, without much ado, yet strictly to the point, inside the Area, you easily will assort the following five categories of nuts:

a) personnel, aka paramedics, aka bitches in white, etc., etc.;

b) not all there, aka phase-shifted, aka cunt-thinkers, etc., etc.;

c) crazy, aka schizics, aka halfnuts, etc., etc.;

d) nuts, loony, mad, etc., etc.;

e) stark raving mad, aka bananas, aka departed, aka irrevocably free, etc., etc.

To begin with, you need clearly understand and keep it in mind that the boundaries between the above categories are oscillating and overlapping – some medical workers, for instance, are distinguished from certain other forms among the following categories only by the color of their uniform.

Secondly (and this is of prior importance!), the touchstone that allows for differentiation, is the possibility of using the individual in the interests of the current social formation, which creates those Areas. Such a formation must necessarily be current.

Now in order of appearance.

Those suffering from a "phase shift" are distinguished from the normal ones by their inability always and under any conditions remain the same as everyone else. Therefore, for all those who are constantly like everyone else, they are not all there. Don Quixote, for example, who was not all there, would have perfectly fitted the ranks of the normal in the previous formation, where he would appear like everyone else.

Schizics, those incomprehensible geniuses, invent theories of relativity, probability, etc., or write something like *The Finnegan's Wake* in the aftermath of which the normal are necessitated to pretend they have understood the slightest bit of crap in all that theories or literary works.

Yet, if you try to push forward your crazy ideas without having the appropriate diploma – welcome to the fifth unit! The hotly hospitable Area will brotherly embrace you!

Nuts have difficulties when asked to intelligibly expound the logic of their actions, however, having a musculoskeletal apparatus sufficient for moving weights, and being capable of reproduction, they are the backbone of any formation. It's only that from time to time them those sancho panzas must have their ass kicked so they'd wipe the drivel off their gaping muzzles and abstain from crossing the street to red.

The Tarzan-like roaring departed, who has achieved absolute freedom from the conventions of morality and behavior patterns of human species, would easily become their own in the family of brown bears, or in the lost and, sadly, never found by Mr. Darwin, link between the ape and human herds, but the currently normal have no application for his qualities.

Yes, but why shall we need each other? What could the normal have to do with the absolutely free? Let's don't forget the mobility and overlapping of the categories; before reaching the absolute, the departed had been start-ups within the lower leagues. Besides, some of the normal (or else exceptionally gifted pretenders) could still harbor hope for a return of the departed ones out of the rough.

"Shine! Shine on!

You, crazy diamond!"

Don't panic, partner! They'll never catch up! They cannot climb the shining peaks of your absolute freedom…

What category am I, personally, from? By the method of excluding the superfluous, I irrefutably place myself at the not all there. After all, no normal one would allow themselves the luxury of a hearty laugh when all alone and there is no "Comedy Club" on the TV.

My belonging to the departed is excluded because of my aversion to impurities; both physical and mental... Well, and I do not have the IQ to count myself one from among the geniuses. I have not been tested but I know for sure it won't be enough for the category.

In the course of life, you have to naturally zip in any of the categories because each of us is just a drop in the streams and tides of the current formation. Sometimes, the current gives me over to a stream to drag along the rapids, at other times I happen to be kicking back in the languid backwaters.

That's what my letter is, actually, about, which I am now due to proceed with...)

~ ~ ~

Everything returns to normal, and in forty-five days I returned to our team. A couple or so of months later, the buttocks also returned to their normal shape. The body is fluid. It's only that walking along the Settlement streets, whose dusty potholes for the future puddle-pools, had already been filled with scattered piles of fallen apples fetched out from under the trees in the gardens and dumped in the road, I felt saddened that everything rolled on somehow without me.

"So the summer has passed,

As if it was not there..."

At 13 Decemberists appeared Guena, the husband of my sister Natasha. He was a representative of a well-to-do layer in the population. His mother, Natalya Savelyevna, with her face and blue eyes was like a movie star from the Mosfilm, but she worked at the station restaurant and every night returned from there loaded with food-filled bags.

Her husband, Anatoly Phillipovich, had already retired, kept shouting at everyone and swallowing his medications – an unmistakable specimen of the managing stratum. The newlyweds still did not get along with the husband's parents, but there's a time for everything...

Yes, I missed the wedding, but every cloud has a silver lining and Lenochka had gone all the way to "Artek". It turned out feasible, despite the pessimistic forecast of "boss" Slaushevsky. Besides, all came off so cheap, I did not pay a kopeck for her seaside summer, the expenditures for recreational facilities in our land were traditionally met by trade-unions.

Did Lenochka meet her mother Olga? After all, Theodosia was also in the Crimea. I do not know. I never learned to ask the most elementary, simple, questions…

The newlyweds returned to live with the Guena's parents and, as the wedding present, I built in their *khutta* yard the walls for garage and summer kitchen combined into one shed. The roof and plastering were not of my concern though. Well, there were also partitions in the bathroom inside the *khutta*. Just so trifles…

The mail brought for me to 13 Decemberists was placed on the handmade shelves, next to the photograph of Eera during her pioneer practice near the town of Kozelsk, in the north of Chernigov region, where she stood midst the summer stream in black sports pants rolled up above her knees, and smiled from under the plastic visor in the cap-kerchief... My mail was invariably the thick monthly *Vsesvit* in Ukrainian. I opened it and, with my eyes closed, sniffed somewhere from the middle – I always liked the smell of fresh print ink...

However, this time there was nothing to smell, it was an envelope which I disliked at first sight. It looked like having been ripped open with a kitchen knife and then, in a fit of funk, they daubed the rent with glue spread, just in case, in thrice more quantities than needed. Here, at once and all too clearly, the hand of layman was felt, the maiden flight of younger generation.

I opened the envelope from its side, but I still had to tear off a strand of paper stuck with glue, sacrificing pieces of typewritten text.

"What is it, Sehryozha?" my mother asked anxiously.

"Did Lenochka not tell you?"

"No."

"She will then."

It was a summons to the local People's Court over the lawsuit by a resident of Nezhyn, Citizen Eera, to dissolve the marriage since the family, in fact, never existed, and I was regularly taken to psychiatric hospitals diagnosed with schizophrenia…

In the queue for the soon-to-be divorcees on the second floor of the People's Court, I was the second, after a couple of ample-bodied local people disappointed in the institution of marriage. They looked like a pair of fluffed-up dove-pigeons, absolutely not talking to each other, and taking pains to gaze the opposite ways.

A girl, a little over the age of 20, invited them to enter for the procedure.

For several minutes from behind the door, there was heard a dialogue of varying loudness but of the same illegibility.

Then the couple went out of the door, still not looking at each other, blushed in their complexion, as if leaving the steam room in a bathhouse. One after another—the man first—they left…

In the room looking like a corridor, two tables formed the letter "T". The judge was sitting in the center of the crossbar table equipped with 2 lay judges, one for his either side. They were a thirty-year-old fair-haired man of military uprightness and a woman well over her forties who had already let all of it go at all. The girl-clerk got seated at the second table where it adjoined the upper one.

I liked the judge at once – a handsome man about 35 who looked like judges in Western movies. His jacket was off and he even opened his waistcoat for a couple of top buttons to represent a true embodiment of the Western democracy.

I decided to play along with him and, sitting on a chair a meter off the “T's” base, assumed the attitude of a kicking back cowboy – the left leg stretched out with its heel planted into the floor, and the right heel resting over the left foot.

"Don’t sprawl! Get seated as you should! Forgotten where you are?!" barked the fair-haired.

"If you demonstrate how to sit at attention, I'd be happy to ape you, Comrade Lance-Corpo.."

"Well, okay!" intervened the judge like a ref in the ring calls “break!” before the boxers turn the noble art of crushing each other’s visage into an unruly fang-and-kick street fight. "Let him sit as he likes."

Then he read up the lawsuit of Citizen Eera about the absence of a family and my diagnosis. He finished off and addressed me, "What can you say in this respect?"

"My wife is always right. Each and every her word is the holy, purest, truth," averred I solemnly.

The girl-clerk registered in the papers that not only the Caesar's wife could be beyond any suspicion.

Then the judge used his home-made trump with which he had started, pumped, and heated up the previous pair of divorcees, "But wasn't there at least anything good in your marriage?"

"Why not? We were the sexiest lovers at the institute."

With a sidelong glance at the flash of innocent flush in the girl clerk's countenance, the judge announced that was enough and the court didn't need any more evidence.

Thus was dissolved my wedlock with Eera.

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Solitary Barge Hauler

My cheeky snubs to the judge at the people's court arched my chest, but not for long. All slipped back into the same ineluctable rut: "O! Woe to me! What for? I loved so much! I was doing my best! Why me?" The unanswerable questions swapped for sticky, meek, and fond dream that one of these days Eera would come and everything would be fine again… The fact, that by the divorce Eera had, with straightforward logic, cleared her way to further life without me around, did not diminish the longing for the unreachable, neither shooed off the hope that everything will, somehow, turn fine all the same…

However, uninterrupted suffering is a rather tiresome occupation and, gradually, I formed a firm opinion that the divorce had to be, after all, celebrated. But in what way? I knew no rituals for the occasion and could only improvise. One thing was clear though, I needed a day not like all other days. And it was for such a day that I went to Kiev.

The Indian summer that year transgressed all the limits of common sense and, even though it was the first week in November, I ventured there in my jacket. Taking into account the fall's depth as reached in the calendar, the dark gray waistcoat went along with the jacket. It did not belong to any three-piece suit but was sewn back in my school years by that same sharp-nosed tailor in her shop next to the bus station... Such was my rig (plus a shirt and pants) when I emerged from the metro station on Khreshchatyk Street and moved slowly along its wide sidewalks grown with gorgeous Chestnuts.

I went down to Red Army Street cobbled with polished flagstones, and walked farther down its slope to the Foreign Book store to make myself the event-marking present, which caught my eye pretty long ago, during the last year's business trip to the dairy reconstruction. On the way, I had to keep in check a nagging worry: what if they had already sold it? However, I was almost sure and I didn't get much surprised making out the bright red jacket of *Chamber's 20th Century Dictionary* on the same very shelf.

The salesman, observing my festive outfit—from under the waistcoat, there also peeped the open collar of my faded red shirt—asked politely if I indeed would want that particular book.

> (...I was not surprised by his doubt – in that year of the then-current 20th century, not every fella could afford a book for 31 rubles 60 kopecks. Except, of course, for a bricklayer celebrating their divorce...)

I left the store with the thick volume tightly wrapped in their special lavender-colored packing paper. It had to be left in an automatic storage cell at the station. Yet, how to get there? On the subway again? No, it was another kind of day. And I approached the curb with flocks of taxis shooting by… From the station, I also dropped to "The Hunter" store, at the address given me by Grynya, who wanted some special fishing rod from there.

After the shopping spree and the subsequent storing of goods, there started the cultural part in the program. That evening The House of Organ Music was filled with the sun shimmer over the sea waves in the pieces by Debussy. Bright sparkling notes in the ripples and splashes of waves dancing happily... As I was a child, my father told me that at listening to such music people were supposed to draw some mental pictures to fit it. I never could follow his advice, the sounds overpowered all clever intentions leaving no space for anything else…

In the post-concert twilight on the sidewalk outside The House of Organ Music, the mid-autumn chill stirred up my hunger. A taxi took me to the restaurant of the Golden Wheat Shoot hotel. At first, I tried to rent a room there for a sleepover, but the receptionist assessed my rig, incongruent with the requirements of calendar, as well as the absence of any luggage, and cut me off with their usual question below the belt: if I had booked a room. They knew very well how to set back vagrant freelancers.

In the restaurant, to orient myself, I ordered a bottle of wine for a starter, and a geezer in a beret on his head immediately landed on the chair opposite me.

> (...when there is a beret, but no briefcase by the man, then you are dealing with an electrician...)

We did not have time to drink even a glass when a young blonde bozo got anchored by the third side of the table. For some unspecified reason, he began to bend his fingers into the composition "I'll take your eyes out!" The electrician grew mum under his beret... My holiday program did not foresee any gladiatorial amusements, so I got up on my feet: "All right, young man. I leave this feast to you. Enjoy!"

I went to the waiters, paid for the wine and left. The blonde rushed after me to the lobby, but of the three glazed entrance vestibules, only one was opened to the porch, seeing me thru lots of glass doors he, immersed in heated agitation, missed choosing the right one. I waved my hand for a goodbye and walked away…

Sleeping in a waiting hall at the station would hardly add festiveness for the day. Another taxi took me to the hotel Old Prague, which was the driver's choice. The young receptionist there had

also picked up the muchly chewed rag of beforehand reservations, yet suddenly turned merciful and found a room for me. She warned though it was more expensive, which was understandable because on getting up there I found that, besides the room, there was also a hallway with a hatch in it.

When in the suite, I decided that it was enough for trying fate's benevolence by my attire, and used the phone to order dinner to the room – fish with potatoes and wine, let it be white, please...

Waking up late in the morning, I checked out and went for a walk about the city... When I was bypassing the ancient Golden Gate, a blond young man ran, panting, by, apparently a part to the monad of the yesterday's boob, who got stuck in the labyrinth of glass vestibules at the Golden Wheat Shoot. Seems like their whole monad are going to have their hands full to sweat out the streak of bad karma because of the feast generously thrown to them by me. But the fool ran into it himself, look before you jump, jock…

On the descent to the Bessarabian Market, I decided it was time for a lunch, and turned into the restaurant "Leningrad". In front of me, a group of Negroes entered the same place, however, I was anything but a racist and followed them. Still, I did not like the over-fat scruff of the concluding guy in their file, some piece of obese Africa. In the afternoon gloom of the restaurant, I could not see in what woodwork they managed to blend leaving me the only guest in the room.

I ordered something "in the pot", so it was named on the menu. They brought potatoes mixed with meat and brown souse, but all that in a ceramic pot, as promised. Eating from the pot was very uncomfortable and also too hot. But I guessed to pour a part of the steaming stuff into a plate on the table, and then was gradually adding to it from the pot.

Before going out, I visited the empty quiet toilet by the restaurant and left it a completely different person to that I who had been entering "Leningrad". The lines by Ivan Franko were slowly swirling in the head:

"One by one get severed the hobbles,

Which kept tied us to the life of the past..."

And not only that. The main difference between me getting in and me leaving the restaurant was the absence of the jacket, which I intentionally left in the toilet hanging on a stall's door. It was the wedding jacket in which I was registered as Eera's husband in the ZAGS of Nezhyn. Besides, it was the same one that survived my premature attempt at leaving it in the toilet of the restaurant "Bratislava" in Odessa. Perhaps, the time then was not ripe yet. Was the act on the celebration program list? No, it was sooner an impromptu inspiration, but I liked it.

Eased and relieved, I lightly walked up Khreshchatyk undergoing its preparation for the demonstration on the 7th of November. The troops of the Kiev garrison were a-drilling their parade step to the gleeful marches by a brass band.

Along the sidewalk, they had put endless board stands for spectators, just 3 steps but very wide indeed, so that the happy crowd would watch the demonstration and wave their hands in the show of approbation and jubilant joy. Before the pending event, there remained 2 more days and the steps were still empty. I walked along the middle one, clapping my heels against its thick planks, a man in his prime, in a red shirt under a gray waistcoat, and the sun rays vibrated thru the branches of mighty Chestnuts.

I walked to the metro station and was ready again to face trenches, walls, and partitions. People do need holidays and brass bands so as to live on further…

~ ~ ~

When Panchenko—without even peeping out to check if it might crush someone's unaware scull—hurled a pig-iron four-section heating radiator from a window on the fourth floor, as if just having nothing better for a pastime, his quirk, in fact, had a quite sound underlying reason. With that hand-made bolt out of the blue, he signaled to all who might be concerned, that the veteran jailbird's balls were still unshaven, and under his eight-wedge cap (the vogue sported by toughs in the fifties) he still was quite a crazy machine. The signal was addressed, first of all, to his superintendent in charge of drawing work orders that determined Panchenko's monthly payment, and to the chief mechanic in whose division he turned a fresh leaf to start a new, honest, life. And it was high time already for a mujik in his mid-fifties. Of course, it did not bother him in any way, that after the second time in Romny I had not the slimmest chance of keeping the position of the trade-union's visitor at SMP-615.

That, at first somewhat chaotic, position I did manage to bring to the impeccable state-of-the-art perfection. Forgotten were the times when someone from the jacks or carpenters returning to work after a couple of days in the railway hospital grumbled disparaging complains about being neglected and not visited by me in the infirmary, whereas no bricklayer on my team was ever ignored. But how could I know? Their foremen did not report to me!

The problem was solved radically – at the end of every working day, I called the hospital registry office to ask if they had admitted for a treatment any employee of SMP-615 and they informed me even of abortions which could be safely counted out because the patient went home on the same day.

Then there arose the question of justifying the use of the 3 rubles, which the trade-union allocated for visiting a hospitalized co-worker. How to spend the sum, so that each sufferer received the equal amount of consolation, regardless of their age, gender, and other inclinations?

Not at once, but that issue also found the proper and—without indulging in false modesty—superbly clear-cut solution. One ruble was spent on drinks – the invariable three bottles: one of beer, one of lemonade, one of kefir. Cakes, marshmallows and/or other sweets were bought for the second ruble. For spending the final, third one, I went to the railway station to chose from the wide counter of the news stall, next to the restaurant entrance, the always popular cartoon magazine *Perets*, the Konotop city newspaper *The Soviet Banner*—which my father

affectionately called "our little liar mutt"—and a couple of the central periodicals for the kopecks of change. From the station, with the fully readied visiting package, I walked to the hospital...

Frictions arose later when I was handing in the report for the spent 3 rubles to get reimbursement from the trade-union. "Boss" Slaushevsky rigorously protested mentioning the bottle of beer in the report. (Trade-unions and beer are two things completely incompatible, mutually exclusive, so to say.) Then, as a compromise, I suggested he write the reports himself and I would sign anything.

And now that, brought to the perfect equilibrium, shebang had to live no longer than until the November report-election trade-union meeting of SMP-615. Still and all, I did manage to feed waffles to Panchenko...

Hearing on the telephone the registry's report, that they had a certain Panchenko from SMP-615, I realized there was no time to lose, I did not want to run the risk of an abortive discharge.

First of all, I bought waffles for him. Then again waffles. And once more – waffles, for the entire ruble, all in different wrappers and from different shops…

With a short glance back over my shoulder at the fuzzy reflection of the 2 of us in the grate-less window with the black winter dark outside, I complimented the interior of the hospital hall. The cellophane packet in my hand issued a soft luring tinkle when I stretched it out to the patient. He could not refuse, as any other employee at SMP-615, he perfectly knew there was beer as well...

Why was I so uncontrollably laughing in backstreet short-cuts from shop to shop to collect waffles of hodgepodge hues? It's hard to explain, but I laughed splitting my sides, laughed till tears streamed down my cheeks...

A couple of days later, Lydda, a bricklayer from our team, asked me, confidentially, in the trailer, "Visited Panchenko?"

"Sure."

"With cakes?"

"No. To him – only waffles."

She knew that I never lied, for the principle's sake. I fell silent and tense because once again I had to restrain a surge of irrelevant laughter.

In a moment, Panchenko entered the trailer for some reason. Carefully, weighing each of her words, Lydda asked if I had visited him.

"Yes."

"With the package?"

"Well, there were some newspapers. I did not even read them."

No more words were said. The rest she poured out at home to her husband Mykola. That he was already a family man for whom it was a crying shame to look up to that wafflister Panchenko…

~ ~ ~

I did not immediately understand why my divorce proceedings left me a vague impression of some incompleteness. Something felt oddly amiss.

> (...the trademark of my mental retardancy is that in the end, I get it plus stuff which, at first, I did not even guess to think of...)

Of course! That people's judge had completely forgotten to mention alimony! As if I was childless... The task of correcting the judicial error lay on my shoulders.

Since December, I started sending monthly 30 rubles to Red Partisans for which transaction, on the payday, I visited the post-office opposite the bus station. And, as you were not my only child, I sent the same amount to 13 Decemberists as well. For several years "30 to Nezhyn, 30 to Konotop" became my financial way of life, and the most recursive line in the pocket notebook. Why just that sum? I don't know. In total, that made up half of my earnings. For the second half, apart from my hygiene-bath-laundry expenses, I sometimes bought books, and every day had a midday *havvage* at canteens.

At first, my mother tried to convince me that the Konotop's "30" could be brought home and past from hand to hand, although she did not even need that money; my argument for the refusal was that doing it that way was more convenient for me.

My status of an alimony-payer was not a secret in our team, given my principle of answering direct questions directly, it was enough for them to ask why each payday I trotted to the post-office from our Seagull. And some women bricklayers also asked that question: why 30 rubles exactly?

Fighting back a wave of anger welling up in me from I didn't know where, I answered no more was necessary and were I even paid 3,000 rubles a month, the monthly "30" to Nezhyn and Konotop would remain just "30".

There were times when I was not able to send out the alimony, and then the line "30 to Nezhyn, 30 to Konotop" had to wait until the required sum was scratched up and, after sending it, a crude tick popped next to the line...

At certain periods, I sent only 15 rubles each way. One such period happened after I accidentally overheard a talk between my mother and my sister Natasha. They were discussing Eera's having sold my sheepskin coat, and keeping all the money to herself. I did note the disappearance of the sheepskin coat, but I had no idea where it was gone, neither how, nor why.

Now, to restore the reputation of Caesar's wife, I had to lower the alimony rate to 15 rubles, until the sum of 90 rubles was collected... I took the money to Nezhyn and, in the post-office on Red Partisans Street, I asked an occasional visitor to fill out the money order address as I dictated. In the space reserved for a personal note, I wrote, in a clumsy left slant, "for the sheepskin coat."

Why 90 rubles? Well, the market price of a new sheepskin coat with longer skirts amounted to 120 rubles. Mine was short and way back from the Object – the rest was pure Arithmetic.

On receiving so large remittance, my mother wanted to ask me about something, but at that time I was not on speaking terms with my parents, so there was no point in asking the deaf and dumb fool of me about "for the sheepskin coat."

> (...here, it is worth to note, that the wisdom of outsiders cannot make us smarter. In one of his stories, telling about a young man who stopped communicating with his parents, Maugham remarks that in this harsh and hostile world people will always find a way to make their situation even worse.
>
> I accepted the wisdom of the maxim, but I did not use it. It took 10 years of separation —4 of which were spent in a full-scale war—so that when arrived on a visit in Konotop, I started again to talk with my parents.
>
> And it was pleasant to pronounce the words "Mom", “Dad". It’s only that the pleasure was as if wrapped in felt sheath preventing real feel and it somehow felt as if I was addressing not my parents, or it was not exactly I talking to them. Probably, the habit was lost or, maybe, because all of us, by that time, had already changed so much...)

As expected, trade-union positions were shut off for me airtight, but no one could ever violate my right to carry out my public duty. I mean the monthly watches in the ranks of the volunteer public order squad.

By seven o'clock in the evening, the SMP-615 male employees gathered in a long room of "The stronghold of the public order squad" whose entrance was in the blind butt wall of the endless five-story block by the Under-Overpass. That same building where there was the workmen canteen number 3, at the opposite end.

First to come was usually the auto-crane operator Kot which was not his handle nor code name of any kind but a quite innocent Ukrainian last name. He took a seat at the wall-butting desk with a load of old papers, pulled his headgear of cheap yet elegant rabbit fur, and started flipping thru the news accumulated from the month past since our previous vigil.

Then, one by one, we popped up too and started our discussion, full of decent virility, of this topic or that, to which Kot, still submerged into his perusal, would blear out from under the black fur of perished animal, that were our wise talk commenced even from as high as the orbital Salyut space station it would inevitably land onto the cunt of Alla Pugacheva or some more available, local slut. And, as a rule, he never mistook because of those coming late enough to miss his arrogant but accurate prediction.

At about 10 past 7, there came a militia officer—ranking from lieutenant to captain—contributed to the mujiks' gossip before pulling a drawer in his desk and handing out the red armbands with the black inscription "public order squad".

Grouped in threes, we left the stronghold to patrol the late evening sidewalks in vigil beats – to the station, to Depot Street, to the Loony and along Peace Avenue, but no farther than the bridge in the railway embankment. The round took about 45 minutes after which stretch we returned to the stronghold—some of the threes tired and emotional—and after a more enliven yackety session, set off for the final watch, so that by 10 o'clock we would go home until our next duty turn a month later...

A couple of times, KGB officers appeared at our late-hour matinees to share their instructions. The first time it happened on the occasion of the upcoming Holiday of the Great October Revolution, and we were instructed to be especially vigilant not to allow provocative pranks. When the KGBist left, a belated militia officer appeared to scoff at his predecessor, already absent, by asking us if now we knew it well that on seeing a spy we should immediately grab him by the collar.

The second and last time, a KGB officer, already another, disseminated confidential information in order to facilitate the capture, ASAP, of a former KGB worker who had disappeared in an unknown direction. She could have changed her hairstyle and color of her hair, explained the KGB officer showing us her black-and-white portrait, yet she got a special sign simplifying identification – a contraceptive coil of Dutch production inserted in her vagina... Our mujiks did not immediately get it what all that was about, but in a moment poured so suggestive questions that the KGBist preferred to leave in an accelerated fashion. After all, he only executed his orders and was not responsible for the stupidity thereof...

In one of the vigil rounds, the men from my "trinity" gave me a slip. Walking in a group of 3 red-armband ornamented volunteers, seemed more or less sane, but seeing that among the passers-by along the sidewalk of the tightly trampled snow under the windows of Deli 6, you were the only one who sported a red rag on your arm, made you feel as if you were not all there.

Keeping a brazen mug, to demonstrate that I did not care a fig, I went on to the station square. However, carpenter Mykola and driver Ivan was not to be made out from among the hasty silhouettes of passers-by. Some of the younger folks looked back at a strange phenomenon – a saucy solo public order trooper. It did not take being a genius to figure out that my co-volunteers peeled off their armbands, bought a bottle of "mutterer" in some grocery store and now, in a secluded spot, were gurgling in turn from the neck to tone up and feel warmer. Where? That was the question.

Most likely, in the quiet mess of short lanes and dead ends between Deli 6 and the high first platform of the station. In that jumbled warren of warehouses, venereal dispensary, a couple of private *khutta*s without kitchen gardens, and other lumber structures. There I turned not that I had any chance or desire to partake in that bottle but surprising 2 evasive Smart Alecs by the efficiency of the deductive method allowing you to detect them in a quiet nook under a lamppost would only serve good both SOBs.

However, instead of the driver and the carpenter, in the cone of yellow light from the bulb up the post, I ran into a genre scene. A romantic couple—a girl walking with a boyfriend—were intercepted by their mutual acquaintance, a burly lovebuster, who started sorting it out.

The appearance of the fourth superfluous with a red armband slowed down the action but only for a moment. Realizing that no more vigilantes were to pop up, the tough started kicking the shit out of his smaller, but luckier in the romantic matters, opponent. The bantam fell on 1 knee, threw his jacket of "fish-fur" fabric off onto the nearby snowdrift, next to his hat that rolled there a minute earlier, and rushed into a retaliatory attack.

I stayed a non-interfering on-looker with a red rag on my arm. The girl picked up the jacket with the hat and held them, as Eera once was holding my rabbit fur hat in the main square of the Nezhyn city. With the odds being too long, the lightweight got felled in the snow, the girl placed his clothes down under the lamppost, took the conqueror by the arm, and walked with him away, into the labyrinth of the tangled snow-clad alleys.

The defeated rose and, seeing that I was still there, shot off an ardent confused oration to sing the strength of spirit, before which physical strength was nothing because only the spirit had power. In Konotop, every other passer-by is a born lord-speaker.

To morally support defeated Demosthenes, I noted that during the fight the girl held exactly his things but not the fur "potty" hat of his opponent, which also had been knocked off in the snow. Hearing the words of consolation, he shut up and hastily checked the pockets in his jacket because, with all his innate love for oratorical art, the common sense is a more prominent feature in a Konotoper…

And no one could ever forbid me seeing to it that women of our team each year on March 8 received flowers—callas—one flower for each female bricklayer because I was not a millionaire and the mujiks on our team not every year guessed to ask how much it cost and collect a ruble off a man. However, the reimbursement for the expenses did not bother me much. I discovered that I liked giving presents much more than getting them myself.

But first, I had to find the city greenhouse which was as far as hell itself. You have to get off streetcar 2 one stop before the route terminal. Then take the left turn, and stomp for half-kilometer along the streets from the Civil War period. Like, Yudenich Street or, say, Denikin Street. The names though were quite Soviet, but the look and feel unmistakably White-Guardian...

When I came to the greenhouse for the first time, the manager took me into a long squat structure with its gable roof made of squares of muddy glass dripping the large rare drops of condensate. She wanted me to see for myself there were no flowers. As for the sprouts in those beds, the callas there had not yet matured, not "flared up", they were just narrow white tubes not turned into the wide-lapel muzzles.

And then, with all my tongue-tied speech problems lost and missing, I gave out a sample piece of Konotop oratory. That was to her, who every day was walking among the greenery of the greenhouse, those callas looked not ripe. But for women on our bricklayer team, who day after day saw nothing but crushed bricks, mortar and icy hillocks of dirty snow, those callas, even in that not "flared-up" form, were the most beautiful flowers...

Since then, while I was working in our team, I never was said "no" in the city greenhouse on the eve of March 8. And I proudly transported on a streetcar seat a sheaf of green-and-white callas that would appear in The Flowers store by Peace Square no sooner than in a half-month…

~ ~ ~

My decision was final and irrevocable – it's time to sum it up. The story I was translating should close the books. That was enough of Maugham for me. Even the fact that the concluding story had to be translated twice could not overturn my resolution.

I was forced to translate it for the second time because Tolik Polos path-lifted my briefcase, which, as it was, contained nothing but the copybook with the last translation, *Giulia Lazzari* it was, when in the morning I took it with me to go after work to Zhomnir in Nezhyn. At such an early hour in the Settlement, you hardly met any passers-by, still less along the railway tracks to the station. Approaching the concrete wall around the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant, I remembered money for the local train ticket, which I had left behind. The absent-mindedness made me go back leaving the briefcase alone to wait by the service passage for my return.

On the way back to 13 Decemberists along the Settlement streets, I met only Tolik who walked in the opposite direction. He also graduated from School 13 but 2 years after me... Grabbing the forgotten money, I came back to the path by the railway tracks. The briefcase was nowhere to see. Only Tolik and I had walked that path. Or was there some unknown third?

The answer was received a week later on streetcar 3. Tolik did not say "hello" to me, he only was making faces from his seat, in the style of Slavic Aksyanov at the "Dophinovka" mine. But—most importantly—his right hand was plastered. Who would need a straighter indication that it was he to pick up the lonely briefcase in a desolate spot? Not me.

(....at times in my life, I'm able to not only see but also read the signs...)

On the whole, the work that followed was not a re-translation, poor Giulia made to betray her lover was sitting vividly enough in my mind and, a month later, I took my last translation to Zhomnir, but already without the briefcase. So, albeit with a month's delay, my decision to part with Maugham got executed. However, it was only a part in a broader plan of action.

Like any other of my plans, it was lacking clear concrete details. My plans, as it were, could hardly be called plans at all, being, like, feelings that it was necessary to do this or that. Details to the plans came only afterward – in the course of execution. The mentioned broad plan arose because I, finally, realized that Zhomnir would do "match-making" for none of my translations.

Both never, and nowhere. And it did not matter why, the main thing was that it was for sure. So what now? Very simple, the issue of publication should be solved in a do-it-yourself way.

To go that way, I had to take from Zhomnir all my translations in thin copybooks for school, of differently colored covers, piled somewhere among manifold heaps of paper on his archive chamber shelves... I arrived in Nezhyn and announced to him my intention to take back my still-not-alpha versions of Maugham in Ukrainian. Zhomnir did not object and did not ask any questions.

He arranged a feast because during these years I became sort of a distant relative in his house. A dinky needy relative of no consequence, but handy at times when, say, pasting the living-room in his apartment with the wallpaper... We sat at the square table, pushed from the wall to the center of the living room, and ate everything being brought by Maria Antonovna from the kitchen. We drank a strong village hooch. Zhomnir was enthusiastically discussing the gold pectoral of great artistic value, recently excavated from an ancient mound in the steppe. Changing the subject, he asked how my current relations with Nezhyn were, meaning Eera.

I proudly stated those relations to be fruitful, meaning you. Then I cautiously asked how Eera was.

"How what?" answered Zhomnir. "Whoring about the city."

Of course, my logic was deductive enough to know the answer to such an elementary “how”. I even could visualize it easily if not for untimely distractions popping up, like, “look! What a strange bird over there!”, or else, “Where did I misplace that thing the other day… What was it a Thursday? I definitely could not find something on Thursday but what was that?” and so on... And now, having my nose paternally rubbed into it was fully deserved. Well, yes, maybe below the nose, I felt sledge-hammered into my plexus, although his reply rammed me not as hard as the words of Eera that she had a certain Sasha, about who she cared to inform my sister Natasha, who withheld the news until my divorce with Eera, to make a booby prize of it, I suppose. Yet, most of all I was bewildered, stunned, in fact, by Zhomnir’s literal reprisal of the response got from the slob to my inquiry about Olga, back at the Konotop Brick Factory...word for word, not a hair-breadth variance…

> (...for all the difference in educational and cultural level, when we need to knock our neighbor's brains out, we use the same good old stone ax...)

When it was time to set off for the local train, Zhomnir put all the copybooks with my translations in a cellophane bag that turned tight and heavy, and went out to escort me to the station. That hooch was damn well strong stuff, but I remember how the local train pulled up and hissed to slam the doors open. Refusing Zhomnir's assistance, I headed into the round tunnel of the car vestibule thru the curved gleam of nickel-plated handrails in its unsteady sides. Catching the left one, I climbed inside, went over to the opposite, closed, door and hung the bag on the top-knob of the handrail there. The last thing I heard was the sound of the door slamming shut behind me...

Slowly coming to my senses in the gradually emerging car vestibule, I still had the top-knob of the handrail clutched in my left hand next to the closed door. The train stood as motionless as I, at the fourth platform of the Konotop railway station. It was empty of passengers because according to the timetable its departure to Khutor Mikhaylovsky was in 2 hours after its arrival in Konotop.

The sight of the empty handrail beneath my clutch turned my abdominal muscles stone hard and stopped still my breathing. On the remaining 3 top-knobs in the car vestibule, there was no cellophane bag either. Slamming the sliding door, I went into the empty car and glanced along the empty rack rails above the windows, then I returned to the vestibule and exhaled: hooooey!

I did not feel like sitting in the leatherette-covered seats of the empty local train, I walked thru the underground passage and over the station square to the Loony park, to a hard, wooden, bench. There I sat for a long time without any thoughts, only now and then seeing myself in the form of a stupidly frozen statue by the handrail, while they were removing the cellophane bag. Who?!. Doesn't matter, makes no difference... Whoever the pillager, they hardly got happy with so a useless spoil, except for kindling firewood in their stove, it would do for quite a few winters.

After the stupefied shell-shock sitting for about an hour, I remembered that it was SMP-615 on-duty day in the public order squad and I dragged myself to the stronghold room to sit on further – indifferent, detached, and silent.

Only with the arrival of the militia officer, I knew what to do next. "Comrade Captain, lend me 3 rubles till our next turn on duty."

"I do not lend in rubles. Only in days of arrest. 15 enough?"

His dull wit only confirmed the correctness of my plan… The next day, 3 rubles were borrowed from our team and, after work, I went to Nezhyn. There, in the five-story block for the institute teachers in the Count's Park, I found the apartment of ever-smiling Nona and said her that, after several years of work, I lost all of my translations from Maugham. Now, for their restoration, I needed the originals of the stories, all of which were collected in the four-volume edition by the Penguin Publishing House that was in her possession. Could she, please?.

Wearing her usual sweet smile, Nona brought the books, placed them into a cellophane bag, and handed over to me. Enormous joy nearly stopped my heart pounding – thank you!.

"How do you like it, Maria Antonovna? That rapscallion Ogoltsoff lost all of his translations in the local train!"

"Because you shouldn't have made the poor boy drink so much!"

Maria Antonovna also did not know that all my misfortunes or joys, ups, and downs, all my pleasures, and deprivations sprung from that rascal on the Varanda River bank in the inconceivably faraway future…

~ ~ ~

"The habit's a heavenly gift

To substitute for happiness..."

This immortal lines of the great classic implies unequivocally, that for the third time they raked me up exclusively out of the developed habit... And that time almost everyone in SMP-615 knew that any other day they would nab me.

2 years later, at an accidental meeting on the narrow trail along the railway embankment, behind the sports grounds on the outskirts of the engineering college, that knowledge was disclosed also to me by the retired Major Petukhov, the then head of the personnel department at SMP-615. Without any pressure or leading questions on my part, Petukhov gave me an account of how the superintendent Ivan was coming every other day from the construction site to the personnel department head's office to call psychiatrist Tarasenko about my latest deviations.

"He sang this morning. Maybe it's time?"

"Let him sing."

"He wrote an explanatory note in verse."

"What note?"

"He lost his helmet and I demanded to write an explanatory. Will you come after him?"

"Not yet."

"He shoved his shirt into a hole in the bridging slab and buried it with mortar."

"That's it! Make sure he doesn't get away."

Singing at the workplace I allowed myself not every day, but rather often. At times, especially when a construction site in At-Seven-Winds drowned in a cold dense fog, one or another bricklayer from our team would ask, "Sing, Sehryoga!"

"I had a wife,

She loved me so much,

And just one time she cheated,

And then she made her mind:

"***Eh! One time, yes, and once again,***

And many, many, many, many more times again..."

However, to the Vysotsky's trade-mark *The Gypsy Girl* our team, almost unanimously, preferred his *The Ballad of Gypsum*:

" I lay prostrate, all plastered over,

My every member's well pre-packaged!.."

As for the helmet, it was not lost, it's just that I gave free rein to my gentlemanly urbane nature. Walking among the construction sites in At-Seven-Winds, I saw by the nine-story block 2 female plasterers from PMK-7. They picked some flowers in the fresh grass, most likely, dandelions because of their yellow color. When asked for a cellophane packet, I, with a wide, hussar, gesture, threw them my helmet to use as a basket for collected flowers. Then I pointed out the brown trailer of our team, so that they knew where to return the headgear to. I saw them for the first time and it was the last time I saw my helmet...

Of all our team, only I wore a helmet, that's why the superintendent Ivan demanded of me that explanatory note. But calling "verses" what I scribbled for him is nothing but a staring flattery, just so vers libre, at most…

Well, about the shirt, yes. With that shirt, I ran into it flatly. That time I imprudently indulged in my inclination to self-invented rituals because it was the first day of summer. Now, was it possible not to observe the event? In summer, even wearing nothing but a tank top under your *spetzovka*, you still swim in your sweat; a shirt in summer is a redundant element.

That green shirt of some kind of finely creased synthetics I donned for 6 years. Yet, that bitch of a shirt did not want to wear off, and I had to sweat in it as in any other synthetic crap, despite its being finely creased. And so, on June 1, I got out of the trailer in kinda green artistic wrap atop of my black *spetzovka* worn, in its turn, on my stark naked torso. I made for the team's current workplace and buried the shirt in one of many loop-holes in the floor slabs among the unfinished walls... There were no garbage bins at the site and to simply drop the shirt into the latrine's *ochco* did not seem right – we had been so close, sweat mingling, buddies for so many years…

Then I went up to the third floor in the next section and laid the traverse wall with ventilation ducts working alone until Peter Lysoon appeared to call me to the trailer. Along the way, he somehow kept his eyes off me and spoke on esoteric botanical topics.

All those strange symptoms flew out of my head when in front of our trailer I saw a UAZ-van with a burly militiaman next to it in his red-band forage cap accompanied by psychiatrist Tarasenko... Our team, together with overseer Karenin and superintendent Ivan, formed an uneven semicircle facing the visitors.

Tarasenko announced to the standing audience that my behavior had always been abnormal and today I stepped over the line by burying my shirt into the hole in a concrete slab. Then he democratically asked the crowd if they had noted any additional anomalies about me.

The people responded with silence. One of our women endeavored to clarify that the shirt was completely worn out and Tarasenko, so as to avoid meandering discussion of a tangent topic, ordered me to go into the trailer and change.

I obeyed unquestioningly, and then I climbed into the van with some drunk in its hold, and we were taken away... During the stop near the Medical Center, the drunk began convincing me to jerk the claws in different directions – the militiaman couldn't chase 2 at once. I kept quiet, realizing that it was better 45 days under syringes than the rest of my life on the run. Then a young plain-clothes guard joined us, bringing one more drunk and, along the trodden familiar road, I was taken back to the city of Romny.

On the way, we made a stop in some roadside village for an additional load of 2 old ladies in black and a troubled man who anxiously swore to all of the present, in turn, that he did not remember anything of what was yesterday.

Upon arrival at the psychiatric hospital, we were led in different directions and, for some reason, I was X-rayed in a supine position. Maybe, they were just testing a newly installed equipment... I did not see any of the drunks anymore, in the madhouse such cases belonged to unit 3, while I was an adherent of the fifth unit…

And again the Area became the arena for daily brainwashing applied to my ass, followed by the overcrowded wardroom for the night repose... Of the acquaintances among all the categories higher than that of the absolutely free, I saw only Sasha, who knew my brother Sasha, but he slept without ever waking up.

As a veteran and for the sake of philanthropy, I turned to the head doctor with the plea to substitute my iminazine injections for iminazine pills. She promised to think it over and, 10 days before the expiry of my stretch, she canceled the concluding stab from the 3 injections in my daily quota. And right now, her name popped up in my grateful mind – Nina it was.

Nothing more remarkable happened, except that I learned how to provide first aid in case of epilepsy fit. It is necessary to grab the epileptic by the legs and drag away from the Area into the shade under the canopy. There he would go on beating his back against the ground, yet with gradual reduction of the tempo until his excitement finally die out. Some halfwits consider it useful to slap flies with their dirty paws from his face, however, that does not have a telling effect on the course of the seizure…

On that narrow trail under the railway embankment, Petukhov did not tell me just one thing – why I was so closely followed and kept under the unremitting control. But there was no need for it because I knew the reason as well as he did.

My arrest took roots in the reconstruction of the maternity hospital, a long two-story building by the crossroads of Lenin Street and the descent from the Department Store. Each construction enterprise of Konotop performed their part in the works. SMP-615 was responsible for several partitions and bathrooms in the right-wing on the first floor. 4 plasterers and I were sent to accomplish the task. We managed it in just 1 week.

When the women were already plastering the partitions laid by me, in the corridor appeared a man in a clean suit and a necktie. Beholding the 4 yummy females, the visitor began to spread out his peacock tail against the backdrop of the wretch of a hand, for which he took me.

I politely asked him to keep his ardor in check and not cough in all directions.

"Hey, you! Know who against you're ramming? I am the First Secretary of the City Party Committee."

"And I am a bricklayer of the fourth category."

"Okay! You'll have it!"

He left and a half-hour later our chief engineer flew into the corridor, out of his breath, because he was also the chairman of SMP-615 party committee. "How d'you dare use foul language at the First Secretary of the City Party Committee?"

The plasterers unanimously testified that there was not a single taboo word on my part which information did not console the chief engineer though, but he left.

That's all. Nothing could be simpler – a male with levers of power at his command versus a male in a mortar splattered *spetzovka*. The only thing that really hurt me was the accusation of using the derivatives of "fuck" because in all the years at SMP-615, I righteously refrained from using such words even deep in my mind…

~ ~ ~

The autumn came and, soaping myself in the bathhouse, I suddenly discovered a bulging stomach on me, kinda rigid fore wings of a May beetle, and similarly unyielding. Soon, my mother noticed that I was turning double-chinned. After one of the late evening dinners at 13 Decemberists, she put her hand on my shoulder to victoriously announce, "You're getting fat, Brother Rabbit! Relax, so it should be, you're from our breed."

I did not answer to the smile in her round face under which—I knew that without looking—a much rounder figure was expanding, so I just kept silent. I did not want to be of such a round breed and turn a blubber guts. I would not succumb to their iminazine! Some radical measures were the must.

If, for a start, we consider those same dinners at 13 Decemberists, my mother skillfully piled no less than two servings of rice or potatoes onto a plate. At the same time, everything was so delicious, that you imperceptibly ate all of the humongous portion.

Repeal of bread became the first step in my struggle to keep lean. Okay, I eat as much as you care to load, but I'm not obliged to eat bread along with it, and I will not. So, I cut it out from my diet even at canteens.

As for the "will not" that was a sham, because I always liked bread, especially rye bread, moreover when it's warm. I was able to finish off a loaf of such bread at one sitting, without any spicing stuff, except for the byword learned from my father: "Soft bread and mouth wide make the heart rejoice at every bite."

A month later, marking that the breadless diet was of no help, I just dropped going to canteens at the midday break which move brought equilibrium to the previously impaired balance. Breakfast in the canteen plus two servings at the late evening dinner stood for traditional 3 daily meals. As for the midday *havvage*, I devoured, by our team's definition, *Vsesvit*, brought once a month by me to the bricklayers' trailer for reading at midday breaks. As a result, by the New Year Eve, in the same city bathhouse behind Square of Konotop Divisions, I proudly observed my sunken, like on a healthy wolf, stomach. I always preferred that form... Some concave-bellied Narcissus.

> (...there are lots of words you seemingly know because you have heard, read, and even pronounced them more than once. Sure, I know the word!.. until asked about its meaning. But overly inquisitive bastards are of seldom ilk, and you continue to interpret seemingly known words the way you vaguely feel they should mean, sort of...
>
> The word "asceticism" is one of the brightest examples of how people do not understand what they themselves are about. 90 percent of the population, to whom the word, like, yes, clear, would imagine a man of wildly lambent eyes above a hirsute ungroomed beard, weary with his self-inflicted tortures and privations. This is just as wrong as applying the word "athlete" exclusively to sumo fighters.
>
> In fact, the root meaning of "asceticism" is conveyed by the word "training". If, cherishing ambitions to win a beer tournament, you keep putting away 3 liters of beer daily, so as to train and keep yourself in proper form, you are an ascetic. As well, as the neighbor's girl that every day rushes violin scales thru your apartment wall. Damn her asceticism with all those f-f..er..flats and sharps!
>
> On the whole, an ascetical ascetic, preparing themselves for future life in heaven, is nothing but a special case among all other sorts of asceticism manifest in manifold patterns, both short and long-term, depending on the purpose of training...)

And what—if I may ask—were the goals that made me so rigorously guard my being thin as a rake, and every weekday write out unfamiliar words from the newspaper *Morning Star*? As I have tried already to explain, my general plans were always marked by ungetriddable vagueness in their details. I simply felt that this or other something had to be done and, therefore, I did so...

The extracts from the *Morning Star* called for a keen attentive self-cross-checking. When meeting in the newspaper some incomprehensible word about which I definitely knew it had been met and more than once already, there rose temptation to neglect it because it was exactly same bugger! Okay, and what's the meaning, eh?

To rummage thru the pile of scribbled up copybooks seemed way too tedious, much easier was to look it up anew in Chamber's Dictionary and write it out one more time. As a result, more than

once I happened to look up a word whose entry page number I could say by heart, but not its meaning. Some colander of a memory. That's what asceticism does to a person, making you go thru a certain set of actions hardly knowing why you have to…

For me, the incident of that evening was not a temptation, I rather felt amazed. And she, on her part, was not seducing me and only tried to claim fulfillment of parental duty because I was grossly indebted to Lenochka. I never took her in my arms, nor kept her in my lap, nor raffled caressingly her hair, nor fondled her cheek, not to mention other "nors" of what I owed her. We just lived in the same *khutta*, where she had once been told that I was her dad, yet who would earnestly consider me a father? Just some dry abstract formula, a contactless, symbolic, dad.

Of course, I never gave her the cold shoulder, and at times I could even get carried away by talking to her, but for a child that, probably, is not enough. And for me, as a father, that surely is not enough but just so turned out my relationships with each and every one of my five children…

When Lenochka was born, I simply was not ripe yet for the role of father. Dad at eighteen? With all due respect to Swan of Avon, that's just ludicrous. Then followed the years at the construction battalion and the institute...

When you were born, I was already fit to be a father, and I loved you selflessly, but not for long enough – my reputation separated us.

I met Ruzanna at her seventh year. She called me "daddy" all along, and I loved her as my daughter but, for the first time, I hugged her when she was departing to Greece, to her husband Apostolos. The consequences of that same chronic, cursed, contactlessness…

Cuddling of both Ahshaut and Emma, born after him, was impossible before Ruzanna, their elder sister, because she'd seen from me nothing of the kind, so caressing them in front of her wasn't right, it would be a glaring iniquity. That's how the father of five children remained just a formal dad. Poor kids!. Yet, taking pity on them only is not just, what about me, who lived a life devoid of children's warmth and fondness?

Except for that occurrence, when four-year-old Emma busted her head in the courtyard of our unfinished house when trying to repeat the number of Chinese circus actors seen on the TV. The oozing blood soaked her hair and stained my shirt sleeve when I was carrying her in my arms to the former regional, and now republican, hospital. A weightless, frightened birdie clinging to my chest in anticipation of something terrible, unknown, she didn't cry at all, believing everything would be fine since Dad was by her side.

> (...children at that age look up to their father as to God, and later they grow up and become atheists because the Almighty, as it turns out, is just a stubborn wrinkled curmudgeon who does not understand a thing…)

The nurse at the traumatic unit treated the wound, the on-duty doctor prescribed antibiotics and 2 days later, when I brought Emma for a second inspection, he yelled at me for being a penny

pincher saving on medicine for my own child! Stupidity is incurable, even a diploma is of no help here…

At the end of the month in the end of the 90s, one week and a half before the salary, I was borrowing bread from the nearest shop and the seller, Razmik was his name, did not even write me into his ledger of misery debtors. In the pharmacies though the drugs were released only for ready money…

On the payday, straight from the line to the university cashier window, I walked off to pay for that beggarly bread, and then handed the rest of my salary to Sahtic. It doesn't not work to make a private “stash” if in the month end you're begging bread from Razmik…

For the record, there is nothing easier than creating a university. You take Stepanakert Pedagogical Institute and call it State University – enjoy!.

I got a job there when they kicked me out of the Supreme Council. And rightly so, with the officially ended war, the management had all the reasons to find out: who it was that analyst of theirs wearing such a brazen mug.

But that was just an outward appearance, because inside I was afraid like everybody else, only that I restrained myself and didn’t race down to the basement used as the bomb shelter, but kept to the corner of my office room, away from the window, and at 18:00 sharp I left the building of the former regional party committee and walked along the empty streets midst the crushing roar of the cannonade. First, what's the difference? And secondly, it’s quite impossible to predict where the next shell, missile, or bomb would burst up…

Arthur Mkrtchian, the first Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh, gave me the job of an analyst before they killed him under the guise of suicide so that no one would ever dare disobey Big Brother.

Well, yes, like, after putting a bullet thru my head, I removed the cartridge case and accurately cleaned the pistol. However, a more authoritative investigator flew in from Yerevan and explained how all that was possible, and Arthur’s wife withdrew her testimony about the dark-haired guest who knocked to their apartment door a couple of minutes before the tragedy because she had to raise their son as a single mother…

Now, following his updated version, all that day she spent in the bedroom because of the temperature and didn't hear anything at all. Yes, people from the nearby five-story blocks saw her rushing to the apartment balcony to scream "murderers!" after a KAMAZ truck without the license number which was leaving the common yard, yet the investigation filed no such testimonies because no one bothered to ask people. So, her son will grow up and get the diploma from the local university, and find a quiet nine-to-six in a quiet institution, like, Protection of Monuments or something. He'll get married and then his wife will bear a boy and they'll christen the baby Arthur to commemorate his grandpa, you know. So is my prognostication...

I did not mix with Arthur Mkrtchian in private because all happened way too fast. He called me, a jobless employee of the defunct *The Soviet Karabakh* (presently *Free Artsakh*) to his office and gave the position of an analyst-translator at the Press-Center by the Supreme Council of RMK. At second hand, I learned that he was a blithe person and somewhat strange, you know, he could laugh quite unexpectedly when no one had shared a fresh joke.

Stepanakert besieged, half of the city turned to ruins, people live in the basements, Karabakh blockaded and he, all of a sudden, laughs!

Well, whatever, I'm still in debt to him and I keep on analyzing. Free of charge...

Who Killed Arthur Mkrtchian?

The dark-haired assassin from the KAMAZ truck does not count that way you'll end by laying the blame on the metal in the bullet. No, the murderer is the one who points the victim out and puts the weapon into the executioner's hands.

Version 1:

Before the war, in the village where Arthur worked as a school teacher, he displeased someone and, taking advantage of the confused muddle around, that someone settles scores. Squaring up on a district level.

(Falls thru because of the suicide staging.)

Version 2.

The displeased is a big shot in Yerevan who has connections in the local Committee of National Security. Squaring up on a republican level.

(Not impossible.)

Version 3.

The displeased puts to use the Federal Security Service of Russia which, as well as the Committee of National Security of Armenia, is that same KGB in a refreshed make-up. Squaring up on the federal level.

(Not impossible.)

At that particular stage in the struggle for the Mountainous Karabakh independence which started back in the 1920s after General Secretary Stalin generously presented this part of the Caucasus, as well as its Armenian population, to the Soviet Azerbaijan, the Supreme Council of the self-proclaimed Republic of the Mountainous Karabakh was located in the building of the

former Executive Committee of the Autonomous Region of Mountainous Karabakh facing the greens in the round square of Pyatachok (‘5-kopeck coin’ in Russian).

The Press-Center by the SC of RMK was one room with one window, one door and two sizable desks (yes, put in the shape of capital ‘T’) on the second floor to the right. The staff comprised the Press-Center boss Guegham, his secretary Aghavnee, the operator of professional video camera Bennic, and the analyst-translator Sehrguey.

The room was constantly packed with dense cigarette smoke and multi-national media correspondents, both in groups and solo dare-devils, equipped with photo- and video cameras, rucksacks and other traveling necessities, arrived from the former brotherly camp of socialism now transfigured into free European states to witness that the old bogey of the USSR was there no more. Although, even from outside, it was already clear that the great Union of the Republics of Victorious Socialism with Human Face (to distinguish it from the Sweden counterfeit, or the repulsive Made-in-China sham by Chairman Mao) got safely palsied, collapsed and disintegrated, it still was interesting to check how fared the Mountainous Karabakh Armenians. They were the first to throw the spanner under the hood of the Soviet terror machine and rally for the mass meetings on the Stepanakert main square in front of the Regional Committee of the CPSU building. The crowd filled the square, people were chanting, “We de-mand!”, “We de-mand!”, they held the posters of a clenched fist and their own live fists aloof in the air over their heads.

To keep in line with the internationally approved practices for such occasions, the Regional Executive Committee voted for sending to both Baku and Moscow the petition to transfer the region under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Everyday rallies on the main square went on until they were reacted to. No water cannons, neither tear gas was used to disperse the meetings in Stepanakert. The development unheard of in all the time under the Soviet rule was answered in another city.

The Sumgait tragedy. The 3 days and nights of pogroms in the city 36 kilometers, 42 minutes, from the Baku city, the capital of Azerbaijan. 3 days of killings, rape, torture, dropping people from their apartment-blocks balconies, pulling with motorbikes noosed baby corpses, you name it.

It was unthinkable, the like atrocities could only happen in some faraway Rwanda, or Jakarta but not in our united mutual Homeland. 3 days and nights of genocide when they break the door of your home, do unspeakable things to your family before your eyes and finally murder you just because your last name ends in ‘-ian’. Ironically, there were ‘-ians’ in the gangs of beasts too because Sumgait, the city of youthful oil-drillers, was built by *zeks* many of whom stayed living there after doing their time, in best tradition of Soviet urban planning: Zona breaks the ground for a town to grow up.

When ex-*zeks* and ‘*chemists*’ were set loose, lots of ordinary Azeri citizens joined the crowd, other Azeri citizens were giving shelter and hide-outs to their neighbors of Armenian origin. Humanity and nationality are different things.

After the 3 days-and-nights of ticking by, the units of the Soviet Army restored order in the city of Sumgait... End same year Mikhail Gorbachov was elected the first President of the USSR which at once disintegrated into a number of independent states because in too many places people started to chant, “We de-mand!”. In short, they became independent states, The USSR collapsed and the Armenians of the Mountainous Karabakh had to defend their land and lives in the war for independence while all kinds of correspondents from the international (mostly European) mass-media arrived from Yerevan (the capital of the independent Republic of Armenia) to Stepanakert (the capital of the self-proclaimed-but-never-recognized Republic of the Mountainous Karabakh) by choppers flown at night to avoid being shot at in the toombs and finally handed their business cards to Guegham who dumped them in the drawer in his desk full of heaps of the like pieces of paper.

By the same night flights, yet seldomer, there arrived activists of different political parties that hugely proliferated in the prominent regions and capitals of the former USSR to enhance their personal political rating, like, ‘I have been in the warring Karabakh!’. There were neither hotels nor restaurants in Stepanakert but lots of artillery and rocket shelling plus aviation bombardments at that time, so the visitors of both kinds did not stay for long (except for the 2-meter tall blonde of a Viking from Holland who lost his way in the toombs and was captured by the Azeri combatants but a week later returned to the same forest and directed along the road to the nearest Armenian village because the representatives of mass-media and international community presented the Baku authorities with strong demarches on his behalf).

The champion of long-term staying became an engineer from Moscow who arrived to simply see his relatives. He lingered in Stepanakert for about 10 days. His parents moved to Moscow when he was just a child and during his marathon stay, he sometimes visited the Press-Center room to pull a chair from the row lined by the wall and draw it to my end of the subordinate desk so as to chat in Russian which since long had become his native tongue, while the rest Check-Greek-Hollandian-Estonian-(you-name-it) crowd sat around Guegham's desk smoking their cigarettes and exchanging enthusiastic clues in Mass-Median… Oh! Sorry! Not all – the Hollander was a non-smoker.

Anyway, the engineer wanted a gossip without an accent and the relatives he came on a visit to could not provide such a treat for him. Though, there might have been a certain hidden agenda as well because he was pestered by a question he couldn’t find an answer to – Why was he here? So he turned to me, like, for the assistance of a specialist. An analyst should know answers, right?

The case developed as follows: one of many engineers at one of many plants in Moscow, an almost autohtonous Muscovite Armenian, at the end of a working day peacefully leaves his plant thru the check-entrance to be met by an unexpected invitation to get seated into a waiting black Volga car and is taken to the KGB (his tongue was unaccustomed yet to pronounce it as FSS). In a huge office there, he was politely asked to pay a visit to his relatives in Stepanakert, all his travel expenses would be met, the CEO of his plant already signed the papers to present him a leave for an unspecified stretch. And what’s his mission over there? No mission whatsoever, except staying by his dear relatives he missed so much since being taken to Moscow at the age of 4…

And now he’s here, hand-secondly swallowing all that cigarette smoke, looking into my eyes and asking thru the mutual hubbub, ‘What for?’

2 days after the Arthur’s murder, he dropped in to say good-bye because they signaled him to come back to Moscow and off he went taking away the puzzlement in his eyes, ‘Why am I here?’

For my personal operational usage, I handled him ‘a weather balloon’, they use such balloons to send special devices to upper atmospheric layers to register meteorological situation up there. When back to Moscow, he’d get another free ride and a polite conversation in the huge office. A quite desultory talk of this and that and nothing in particular because a weather balloon is not supposed to know the data brought back by the recording devices. But then the talk might turn out even a short one, a pure formality, you know, there's no need to go deeper about an accomplished mission. Well done, brunette from the Armenian KGB… damn!.. well, CNS, for the Committee of National Security of the independent Republic of Armenia...

A classified session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Mountainous Karabakh is under way. The Mountainous Karabakh got locked within unsurpassable blockade, Azeri forces widely apply GRAD installations for bombardments of Stepanakert, villages change hands in stubborn fights... Especially bad news – the enemy acquires consignment of ground-to-air thermal missiles the use of which blazed away the Russian intervention to Afghanistan... Here they are a deadly threat to the delivery of fuel and ammunition by choppers.

(Later, it turned out that the buyer was Chechnya, then at their first war with Russia, yet two Chechen emissaries were killed in London by an agent of Armenian CNS. The British police managed to arrest the agent, however, in prison he poisoned himself with potassium cyanide passed to him in a bread loaf from a visitor. ‘I don’t want my family suffered, the KGB’s hands are too long,’ were his final words before successful application of the transferred dose.)

A ‘road of life’ is the must, some surface communication between the Mountainous Karabakh and the outer world, a 'corridor' towards Mother Armenia is needed urgently, which calls for capture of the Lachin city that controls 50 km dividing Karabakh from Armenia…

At that point Arthur laughed. Who needs that Lachin? We’ve got hundreds of kilometers of common border with Iran, cutting a corridor in that direction would cost no casualties. Thus we create communication with the world outside, with the Diaspora…

A fortnight later Arthur was murdered because he wanted way too much. He wanted to make his own decisions how to struggle for the independence of his homeland but Version 3 still remains Version 3, even in the Mountainous Karabakh...

That is why the next, incumbent, Chairman turned to the KGB, whose structures remained alive and kicking in the debris of the collapsed Soviet Union and turned supranational (despite its

renaming all over the former Soviet Republics), retaining its single and indivisible Center and the incorruptible KGB archives.

So, the mentioned officeholder could very possibly get his ass kicked by Big Brother for so sloppy attitude to the selection of accessory personnel for the Supreme Council of the newly independent Republic of the Mountainous Karabakh. Or else, so as not to pose myself for more than there can, actually, be, the decision was based on the old good xenophobia.

In any case, I was pink-slipped as a commodity extravagant in the peace time. A month later, instead of me, the analytical department of 30 employees was created and approved, headed by the local renown amateur philatelist, but very clever. Maybe, somewhere in England, an official is a servant of society, but by us it's the beard of bloodsucking lice that plagues the rest of people. And you can't ditch the bitches because it is what they've been trained for…

The glass in each and every window at the State University was, naturally, smashed by all those bombardments. Yet, the 3 windows in the Rector's office were restored and all the rest just got sealed with vinyl. The wind, predictably and freely, frazzled the translucent patches whose remains snappily applauded with their jagged tatters whenever it grew fresher.

In the classrooms, they installed the tin boxes of wood burners and in winter mornings the University House Manager forked out 2 logs to each group monitor, from his shed in the yard.

By the middle in the second class, the wood burners became as cold as ice, the useless rusty boxes of dead ashes, and the student girls began their protestations that they were freezing too. The student lads did not complain though, because there was none of them, they were freezing in the trenches on the front line, well, so what if the war was over?

And then I ordered to the girls, "Fall in! March in a circle!" And they marched around the frozen Woodburner, chanting one or another exercise from a paperback collection, yellow with age, printed for the USSR universities in 1958. And when they grumbled that their heads were dizzy from that circling, I commanded to turn around and march in the opposite direction. They giggled but obeyed and chanted on... Kinda Peripatetic Methodology of Feldwebel Ogoltsoff, however, it helped to hold on until the coughing clangs of bell thru the windy corridor…

O, my!. Where have I drifted off again?!. Aha, I remembered – children are the flowers of life...

But enough of that, let's return to Lenochka's try at fixing the dismally wrong situation of having no normal dad... She entered the room and sat on my lap, cutting me off the desk with the opened dictionary, a copybook, and a *Morning Star* issue on it. Turning her face up at me, she raised her hand and fondled my cheek with her small palm. Probably, she tried to show her austere father how to do the trick.

> (...what pushed me off? Fear of falling to incest? Not a chance, with my built-in robotic self-control.

Most likely, the pitiful smile on her face saying "Oh, you poor thing!" put my back up...)

"Well, enough, Lenochka, I have to work."

The smile gave way to a sullen look, she pouted and started to bound in revenge, still sitting on my lap.

"What?! Dreams of sweetmeats? Ain't it a bit early?" And I rose to my feet, like a soulless robot, leaving her without the pad for bouncing.

Several days later, coming back from work, I noticed a change on the bookshelves. There appeared a black hole. The high cheekbone in Eera's face, on the amateur photo in the middle of the stream, was punched thru. The tool of that vandalism and, maybe, even Voodooism served a sharp pencil or, possibly, a ballpoint pen. I did not dwell on the question: who? – it didn’t matter.

"Lenochka, come here!"

"What?"

"As a father, I have to take care of your education, so that you understand what is what. Now, look at the photo on the shelf.”

"What?"

"This is called 'baseness'."

"It's not me."

"I am not saying it's you. Just remember what 'baseness' is. And it makes no difference who does it."

The photo had to be taken to the studio opposite Loony. Their employee Arthur, a young Armenian specializing in the transfer of photo portraits to ceramics, said the hole was fixable. Only I asked to enlarge the picture to the size of a wall portrait, leaving everything as it was, and the stream too... For the restored and enlarged photo, I also bought a cardboard frame and put it back on the shelf.

Seeing the result, my mother gave out an icky snigger, and that was her only comment. I did not start any pedagogical conversations on the topic, and the photo remained completely immune to malicious attempts and stood there for the dust to gradually set in…

~ ~ ~

Before an anniversary of her son Andrey, my sister Natasha complained it was impossible to find a railway model even for the ready money. If I remembered that huge circle of tiny rails with a miniature train running along, back at the Object... I did have vague recollections of the beautiful toy and picked her complaint up as an excuse to break out of everyday Konotop life. I was a loving uncle after all!.

For a start, I went to Kiev. The saleswoman at the specialized department store Kids' World sat glumly behind the counter in a black padded jacket of workmen over her blue coat of the specialized store uniform. She perked up a bit when I reported that my wish was a chuff-chuff. She chuckled and answered in a villagers' parlance, so that the churl of me would get it easier, "Ain't a-having no chuff-chuffs here." It did not surprise me though because whatever said by Natasha couldn’t be some other way.

The next detail, popped up into the plan, became the capital of our mutual Motherland – Moscow. That's where led the caravan trails to trodden by those exasperated with empty store shelves in the semi-deserts of chronic deficit… In the metropolitan Kids' World, there were chuff-chuffs with cars, and rails, and bridges so that the train could run along, powered by a tiny battery. I took the prey to the railway station, stored it in an automatic storage cell, and returned downtown to snatch my share of the cultural life in Metropolis.

At the ticket office of the Bolshoi Theater, they told me that the tickets had to be reserved 2 weeks beforehand. A little disappointed, I left the glorious hotbed of culture discriminating against flotsam loving uncles.

Right outside, on the sidewalk, there stood a glass cubic booth entirely curtained from inside with all sorts of show bills, in which they sold tickets to the theaters and concert halls of the Moscow City. For the coming night, they offered to choose from the concert in the Kremlin Hall featuring the most prominent pop stars and the concert of a nondescript jazz band at the Central Theater of the Soviet Army. So I could visit the Kremlin for the staple stale garbage they poured for years on TV, or... "Jazz, of course!"

> (...they say that the railway station in Chernigov was built under the Germans, during the occupation. And I trust those sayers. Why? Well, at least for the fact, that they are not paid for the gossip, unlike official compilers of countless Soviet history books.
>
> And they say also, the bird-eye view of the Chernigov station presents a Teutonic cross. I had never considered the building in question from above, yet I can testify that from all the stations visited by me, only there any time of the day you could have ready boiling water from a big copper tap...)

And all that reminds me, that the building of the Central Theater of the Soviet Army looks like a five-pointed star, if you fly over that pentacle and have time to cast a look down, so the hearsay... Inside, it had a massive interior with a large hall on the first floor, and the exhibition stands in the wide galleries on the second.

I scrupulously examined the exhibition of envelopes and matchbox stickers issued during the Great Patriotic War, because I arrived there 2 hours before the concert. And what else could I do in the unfamiliar winter Moscow? The pictures on the envelopes and stickers, notwithstanding their innocent primitivism, seemed nostalgically appealing because I grew up on black-and-white movies of that period.

Then I went down to the hall, where the jazzmen soon began to install and check their instruments on stage – the drummer kit, the vibraphone, the speakers... Having finished these preparations, the musicians attacked the bold Jewish man for coming so too late. Defensively, he drove them a fool about hardships of Moscow life, and then went on a counterattack threatening on one of those days to give up all that music altogether, and let anyone give him a good reason why he needed all that at all. They left the stage, and the hall began to slowly fill up. For the audience of about 100 jazz lovers, the rows of violet soft plush chairs in the hall were more than enough.

And the concert started... The announcer was a tall fat girl who also sang at times. I took in one number after another and wanted only one thing – let them not end. What Dixieland the vibraphone sounded! And what bass guitar riffs! For one number the bassist was left alone with the girl and his bass guitar and they, just 3 of them, performed such a blues on the wide empty stage!.

The Jew came out only once, he played a tom-tom. Played?!. The whole continent of Africa would never give out on their drums any likeness to that number. I forgave him for his bald head and dumb talk before the concert because he turned into a completely different person. He forgot that he did not need it and created rhythms filling you with joyous, fervently spumescent thrill. "Bravo!"

Apparently, in the Central Theater of the Soviet Army, aka TTSA, they held another event, parallel to the concert, because to the barrier in the cloakroom there also crowed officers in uniform, who had not been present at the performance. The cloakroom attendant girl brought 2 clothes at once, and put them on the counter: a Generals' greatcoat with red silk lining and karakul collar (so this withered mushroom on my right is a General?) and the camel's demi-saison hair from Alyosha Ocheret. She laid them down on the barrier and gave a weeny wistful sigh.

> (...and what else can you do? The everyday insoluble conundrum – either a hussar in his prime, yet without a kopeck in his pocket, or a busted disrepair of General with a secured income.
>
> Everyone has levers to please the ladies in sighing mood, it's only that those levers are located in different spheres...)

Moscow taxi drivers were more professional than their Kiev counterparts. Anyway, the one who picked me up after the concert, having estimated my look and lack of hand luggage, guessed to take me to a hotel where they did not start the fiddle-fart talk about reservations... The hotel Polar was starting from the sidewalk and getting lost somewhere up there in the darkness. The

receptionist sent me by elevator to unimaginable heights between the twelfth and sixteenth floors.

The suite was similar to the flophouse-styled doss rooms at Ukrainian railway stations, where you could spend a night if having the passport and 1 ruble on you. It's only that in the room at Polar the beds were more, about 20 pieces, for the most part laid already with the guests changed to their sportswear. At that moment, my stomach reminded me of the omission to dine after the cultural life, and also of having no snack when in the pursue after a train model. So I asked where a dining room or buffet was, and the relaxing sportsmen, kinda gloating, explained that anything of the sort was closed at seven. I felt more and more hungry as well as the growing urge to punish my neighbors too happy to break the unwelcome news, so I take off my camel coat and whipped back down by the elevator.

On the wide slab of a porch outside, alongside the hotel entrance, there also was a tall door to the restaurant which, naturally, was locked, yet well illuminated far inside where you could discern some kind of motion... I started to pound onto the brown frame of the glazed door. A man in a cap and yellow straps on his jacket sleeves appeared behind the glass. At the sight of me in the jacket wide open on a white shirt, against the black-ink background of the night pricked by the weeny sparkles of downing flakes, he had no choice but to deduce that I was a guest, who had ventured out from the restaurant to powder my nose and stuff, in the open air. He unlocked the door and I rushed past him into the hall.

The restaurant occupied a pretty wide area, which allowed for celebration of 2 unrelated weddings at once, and there still remained vacant tables. I had to wait for a long time, but at last a waiter approached me to whom I reveal my wish to have a square meal, plain, without excesses. To pass the time before he fetched my Spartan order, I watched the dance of the newlyweds from the nearby wedding. At the end of their kinda tango, the burly bride got bugged and dealt a mean elbow punch into the chest cage of the skinny groom. He clutched his tie to keep a painful gasp back, face cringed in a fake smile, where a few teeth were missing. The foundation of marital relations was being laid as early as the wedding party.

Oh, boy! You've really stepped into... Sorry, that was a wrong card… Aha! Here it is!. "May the love and happiness you feel today shine thru the years…"

Paying for the meal I was 1 ruble short. Well, to be honest, I had a ruble, but I wanted to keep it for the next day's expenses. I asked the waiter's name to make up the shortfall later. He gave his name and did not insist on getting the ruble immediately.

Snugly filled, I got back to the room up there, and to the questions of the curious roommates informed, with a yawn, that the restaurant below was still working…

24 hours later, I arrived in Konotop and proudly brought the birthday present to At-Seven-Winds. Natasha's family already lived there in the nine-story block constructed by PMK-7. The trip by the elevator to the fourth floor seemed provincially short, but their door was not opened to me. Guena sometimes left for sessions at his technical institute by correspondence in the Donbas, and Natasha was, probably, visiting some of her section neighbors. I did not know a single one of

them, although at times I visited the block because, in the way of helping the young family, I wrote all the test works on philosophy and history for Guena. From the black sheep of a lousy brother-in-law, you still could sometimes get a fluff of wool…

On my way to 13 Decemberists, I turned in one of the dead-ends on Pirogov Street, where stood Guena's parents' *khutta*. His father was asleep already, and Natalia Savelyevna sat in the living-room with Andrey – her grandson, aka my nephew. I wanted to leave the box and go, but she asked me to assemble the toy railway, Andrey was still awake anyway. When the train model started, with a low buzz, circling over the floor in the living room, I was not an uncle anymore, Andrey and I became equal in age…

~ ~ ~

The recovery of the translations lost on a local train in the frenzy of drunken akinesia, took about a year. Because they still were fresh in my memory I couldn't extend the pleasure for a longer period. After the final full-stop in the last translated story, I took the four-volume collection to Nezhyn, to return it to Nona.

Nearing the teachers' block in the Count's Park, I caught up with Nona and Lydia Panova, who was my group's curator in the years of my study at the English Department of the NGPI. They were heading to the staircase-entrance in their section but noticed me and stopped to wait. I greeted the ladies and informed Nona how impossible it was to convey by mere words all the gratitude I felt for the four-volume originals, borrowed from her and now brought back, here you are.

She smiled from under her glasses and reached out for the cellophane bag. I intercepted her hand, like, for a democratic handshake in the style of characters by Jack London. But instead, unexpectedly even for myself, I gallantly stooped to kiss the back of her hand. Only after that, the bag was passed. Regaining the upright posture, I gave Panova a stiff nod and left... Well, at least I hadn't clicked the shoe heels like hussar Lieutenant Rzhevsky, the f-f..er..I mean, flamboyant hero of the f-f..er..folklore dirty jokes.

My euphoria got off the local train at the first stop after Nezhyn and grim misgivings turned my fellow-travelers. What a blessing, after all, is the inability to make up detailed plans! Them those plans should be kept as short as possible: Prepare a collection of translated short stories for publishing in 150 000 copies. Period.

When thinking the plan out in all the minor details, you expose your whole undertaking to a deadly risk. There inevitably will pop up some insurmountable detail and send your plan to RIP, the way Titanic was tranquilized by its iceberg. Look out! What the f...!!!!!

Bang!. Krchbrdzzz!. And then there comes the muffled, mind-pacifying, sound of sedate bubbling...what's the use of anything...why to strive for the impossible...ible...ble…

Now, what normal publishing house will ever look thru my scribble-scrabble scrawling?. But, is there a way to transform them into typewritten text? Maybe, learning to type by myself? A

yummy plan! D'you know a place where they sell typewriters?. (...and another iceberg penetrates the hold....)

The secretary of Manager of SMP-615 had a juggernaut of "Yatran" typewriter on her desk. Sort of a shop floor machine tool with a black cord to feed it with 220 voltage. You simply touched a key and it responded with series of uncontrollable bursts, in the style of a Kalashnikov assault rifle, nothing like the lasciviously seductive cluck-cluck-cluck of typewriters in the movies. Besides, the secretary did not know Ukrainian, and even Russian texts she typed by only index-finger, in turn.

...well, suppose, after work, I would come to the office and little by little...

Yes, this one also went straight to the sea bottom, because the new boss of SMP-615 was so jealous. He viewed the SMP-615 administrative building as a kinda personal warren or, say, chicken coop, and would not tolerate any bricklayer horsing around even after work. The icebergs of unforeseen details threatened the plan from all sides and brought the navigation to a halt…

We worked in the locomotive depot at the construction of the three-story administrative building, when my sister Natasha, at a chance meeting on a streetcar, shared that Eera, by the by, was going to get married in Nezhyn. Doubts in any information from my sister were senseless, you simply had to take it for granted... The news in passing way of crushed me for more than a day.

Yet, I recovered, thanks to our foreman Mykola Khizhnyak's suggestion that I dismantle the trestles alongside the finished partition on the second floor... When the laid partition gets as tall as 1.2 meters, you have to install the cradles by it, bridge them with timber and continue laying bricks from that trestle, up to the ceiling. The cradles brought from the SMP-615 base were too few for all the team, and we were substituting them with *ratsookha* (that is how our team streamlined the word "rationalization).

Ratsookha was a series of pallets stitched with nails in twos with each pair working as a cradle. Because the pallets were shorter than needed, on top of the first decking we added further *ratsookha* to be bridged with boards forming the next level deck. The whole contraption looked like a house of cards, was more flimsy and shaky than the legitimate trestles, but it worked. The trickiest moment came with dismantling *ratsookha* trestles. Some of the boards in decking were nailed to the pallets, others not, and they all were high above your head so, when you started to knock them off and down to the floor, the scattered fragments of crushed bricks and layers of mortar spilled and dried over the planks up there were pouring down as well. Few people on our team liked dismantling trestles. And for me, it was, sort of, a chess nut to crack or guessing, like a sapper from an action movie, which wire to cut to diffuse the bomb. Only the falling fragments should be dodged in time as befits a seasoned chess-player... However, for that particular dismantling, I sent all chess to hell.

Furious, like a berserk Viking running to battle in just a flax linen tank top shirt, with a long iron breaker I pulled the boards away from the nails screeching and squealing in protest. When the top deck collapsed on the floor I, in frenzied swaying over the mess of boards under my feet,

continued slashing and slitting the cradles of the stitched pallets with the sweeping blows of enraged breaker, while roaring like a wounded beast: "A wedding?! Here's a wedding for you!." My nostrils rounded, and sprawled in passion, pumping, in and out, the dust from the thick cloud whipped up by toppling crashing trestles.

It does feel good to ravish in ecstasy of cutting all the tethers, cutting loose and letting yourself go, at least sometimes… with quivering wings of your nose, taken away by the tsunami wave of raging wrath, forgetful of all at all in this delightful, mad, godlike demolition of anything on earth or in the heaven. Daamn! Get it!. Of which divine pleasure I'm, alas, deprived. Because even while raging in the unruly leveling of what was there to destroy, I still was fully aware that all that was nothing but a mere aping of Odysseus' action in a recent movie adaptation of his wanderings. He similarly pulled his lips over the clenched teeth, when on his return home he started knocking off, one by one, the suitors to his wife Penelope. As for the wedding which "here's for you!", that also was a quotation from the same movie.

Anyway, just in a few minutes in place of the trestle, there was a heap of boards interspersed with torn up pallets. The cloud of dust hung in the air over the battle field and, in the corridor, the foreman's wife, rigger Katerina, standing still near the doorway, listened intently – what wedding was I about?.

My sister Natasha never reported on Eera's new marriage. Seems like the flash-team of Odysseus and me did a shamefully good job at derailing quite a natural course of events in the life of an innocent, unfamiliar, female, whose only error was being same-named and living at the place once dwelt by my Eera. Just another folly of mine...

> (...as it turned out, I was neither a wolf nor a hooey-pricker, but an ornery dog in the manger. Like those kings that sent their divorced wives under the home arrest in a monastery. Yet, if the monastery has a proper gardener with a good lever, as depicted by Boccaccio...
>
> Oops, I am again at it, this time carried away inventing rationales for royals as if I don't have problems of my own...)

But it was also Natasha who showed me a solution to the titanically insurmountable problem of turning the manuscripts into typewritten text. She said there was a typing pool on the street connecting Square of Konotop Divisions and the Sennoy Market and, maybe, someone there would agree to type those translations of mine...

The two-story house of the typing pool looked like the "Cherevko's school". From the entrance, a straight flight of wooden stairs led to the second floor where, in 2 adjacent rooms, a dozen of typists were with amazing speed chirping their typewriters. One of them, named Valya, with a bob-cut blond hair, agreed to type the shortest from the short stories, which I brought along in a thin copybook for a probe. She appointed a day for me to come after the finished text. Taming my heartbeat, I said I had more translations. She replied I could bring them too, by 1 or 2 at a time. I asked her about the payment, but she waved the question away...

For a couple of months, I was visiting the typing pool on the days said by Valya. I approached the house from the opposite sidewalk, in the best traditions of underground conspirators and secret agents. Diving in the wide-open door of the entrance, I cautiously sneaked to the second floor – just only not to shoo off the crazy luck... Passing to Valya the copybook with the last of the stories, I again tried to find out about the payment, and she again dismissively shook her head.

Labor must be rewarded, so I decided to pay anyway, if not with money, then in kind. Near the streetcar stop by Peace Square, on the first floor of the five-story block, there stretched a row of shops, overhanging the sidewalk with their somewhat droopy shop windows. The last in their row was The Flowers on the right, and the first, close to the square corner, The Jewelry. There, after several circles around the glass box-cabinets with exorbitantly expensive necklaces, bracelets, and gold rings, I bought a silver string for 25 rubles. To fix it with a fitting case, I purchased a round lacquered powder box with an ornament for 5 rubles plus, however, that was from The Souvenirs section at the Department Store...

Collecting the typewritten pages of the last story, I gave Valya the powder box and asked to look under the lid. She picked up from it a long thin string of white metal.

"Melchior?" inquired the typist from the next desk. I did not explain anything to anyone: whoever wanted would find a way to check what was of what... That month, the alimony to Nezhyn and Konotop again nosedived to 15 rubles each…

A couple of days before May Day, I again felt like giving in to rituals. From 13 Decemberists, I brought a piece of scarlet cloth, 40 cm × 40 cm, to the site in the locomotive depot. I nailed it to a two-meter beam from the pile of remnants of former trestles, and it turned a cheerful bunting. So that it was not in the way with the work of our team, I fixed it upon the finished corner of the third-floor walls, and there it splashed happily in the spring wind, above the sun-gleaming river of railway tracks that streamed towards the station.

Peter Kyrpa asked me if I was again for it, and I drove him a fool about the day of the international solidarity of working-class people. He promised they would soon come to nab me again, but our team tacitly dismissed his prophecies. Laying the courses of bricks in the wall, we sometimes looked back at the ripples in the flaunting red above our stooped working-class backs…

On the morning of May Day, in my jeans and a T-shirt, I went out to the veranda to put my shoes on. My parents also were there though for many years already they considered themselves not liable to partaking in them those demonstrations. I sat down on a small stool made by golden hands of my father, to tie the strings on my black leather shoes.

"You're not going anywhere," my mother said, and she moved to block the way to the glazed veranda door.

"You'll stay home," confirmed my father, and bolted the same door with the steel latch produced by him at the RepBase. The happening looked like a home arrest without trial and investigation. Still sitting, I bowed my head and, in a low voice, began a plaintive air:

"Oh, Dnipro, Dnipro,

you're a mighty stream,

With the clouds afloat above you..."

I did not know the following lyrics from that song, so I got up and took a step towards the door. My father seized my neck with the grip of his working-class arms of a hammerer, diesel engine tamer, and skillful locksmith. I always admired the bass-relief bumps of his biceps. My mother hung on my opposite shoulder.

Schlepping their total weight, I continued slow progress towards the door. There, I pulled the latch aside, wriggled out from the suffocating grip of the 2 opponents, and jumped off the porch onto the brick-paved path to the wicket.

"Buster!" shouted my father.

"Scoundrel!" backed him up my mother.

With a victorious sneer, I exclaimed, "Ca-up, Mom!"

(...in our family tradition, at the age of 2 I pronounced "catch up!" that way...)

Since then I stopped speaking to my parents, and I also dropped participating in the May and November demonstrations. Instead, on reaching Professions Street, I turned left and walked to the very outskirts, where the *khutta*s were replaced with meadows bordered by trees in the windbreak belt along the railroad embankment. From there, the deserted dirt road led me to the station of Kukolka.

I did not go to the station though, but after a couple of kilometers followed the solitary track branching off the main railway. It was never used by trains because of being a reserve track in case of war. Such a case would make Konotop a target for bombardment, as a strategically important junction, and the reserve track detoured the would-be-destroyed city... Following that track thru the empty fields, I reached the forest by the Seim river.

To the Seim itself, I went out not far from the local train stop "Priseimovye", and walked to the place on its bank where once, still unmarried, I spent a day with Eera. In that spot, I read an issue of *Morning Star*, almost completely, bypassing the last sports page, which I always ignored anyway. The newspaper was left in the grass on the bank, in case it might come handy for someone.

The return journey was made along the main two-track embankment. I entered Konotop together with it and for a long time continued walking along the adjacent gardens, right up to the second bridge, where the embankment turned to the railway station. There we parted, and I went on, by the outskirts alongside the Swamp. Already in the late evening darkness, I crossed Bogdan Khmelnytsky Street behind the old cemetery and, going up Sosnowska street, I reached the terminal of streetcar 3, from where to 13 Decemberists there remained hop, skip and a jump.

On the whole, it was like whirling in a wide vicious circle, with a return to the starting point after walking all day. The music from the demonstrations loudspeakers was substituted with self-made marching chants, like:

"So what about

are we laughing

while our shoes

this trail is roughing?"

But all that was in the future, while for the very first time, I did not have *Morning Star*, instead of which there was a pinprick feeling in my chest on the left. And it did not want to disappear, no matter how often I scratched the T-shirt in that area.

Even at night the annoyance persistently stayed by me, so in the morning I decided to have a session of labor therapy. I went to the locomotive depot, penetrated its grounds deserted and submerged in quietude, because of the second holiday day, and went to the construction site of the administrative building.

At the hillock of white silicate bricks dumpage, I planted an empty pallet and started stacking bricks on it. At times, it was necessary to press my chest with the left elbow, because the pin in there got replaced with a thick knitting needle. When the standard 12 courses of bricks were stacked up on the pallet, I told myself that my case was not terminal, and climbed to the incomplete third floor. There I took the Jolly Roger down from the corner wall, tore it from its mast, and slipped into a loop-hole in the slabs, and buried with dried mortar lumps and other debris…

Kyrpa's threats remained just empty words, I was never taken to Romny that summer. Might it be I had grown wiser? Very questionable indeed. It's just because I had not run into a sore spot of some high-ranking bitch of a cadre... By the middle of May, the needle, or pin, or whatever it was to pierce my chest, gradually dissolved, and many years later I realized that it was the first of heart attacks suffered by me…

~ ~ ~

In my rough plan there cropped up another, but already pleasant, detail, that of assembling the typewritten pages into one complete volume of stories. For that purpose, I bought a folder from

the Department Store, with a hard plastic cover and nickel-plated rings inside. They usually use such folders for annual accounting reports lined up on the shelves in the accountancy office; sturdy, respect inspiring rows. To punch the holes for the folder rings in the pages of text, I borrowed the puncher from the secretary of Manager of SMP-615 in the administrative building. The new boss's complexion grew green when saw me in his poultry farm, however, his sore spots did not qualify yet to be considered high-ranking enough…

The folder with the collection of translated short stories was holstered into a festive-looking cellophane bag and I took it—bugle your trumpets, fanfarade! Roll, timpani, roll!—in the capital city of Kiev, to the book publishing house Dnipro.

In the first room, where I proudly announced the arrival of a collection of translations [Here! Here!] of short stories by William Somerset Maugham, the jovial young man informed that he was not the person in charge of Maugham, and the expert I needed was to be found 2 offices farther down the corridor. If would I like him to have me seen over there? With dignified gratitude, I declined.

In the indicated office, there sat a fat, but still young, man staring in disgust at a skinny pile of typewritten pages inside an open looseleaf folder of purple cardboard, with short white strings in its covers spread wantonly atop his desk... He reluctantly opened the heavy hard-plastic-armored file that I handed him over his desk, and glanced at the title of the first story in the collection.

The Rain

He shut the file abruptly and asked who I was sent by.

In confused bewilderment, my mind revved to its limits: ...forbidden to come here on your own accord?....too high circles… I should have been sent by some or another duke***, so that the courtier-receptionist could guess whose vassal I was… to compare the duke's weight with that of his suzerain—marquis***—and know how to handle me… and then one phone call to verify—just in case—for him to decide to which drawer he might safely stick it in… and don't you cherish no hope, under so polished a shebang, to find a hole for the f-f..er..I mean, freelancer-outsider.

Meanwhile he, just in case, opened the volume once again, someplace in the middle, and immediately slammed it shut.

"I'm just an errand-boy," clarified I, "They asked me to take it to your publishing house, so I brought it here."

"Who?"

I opened the file to show the sticker on inside of its back cover with my Konotop address. "This friend of mine," said I.

It was below his position to talk to a messenger who was not sent by even somewhat petty baron but came from.. what was it? Konotop, or something he never needed no slush from... I coldly replied to his official goodbye and left the room.

The next evening, in Konotop, coming from work, I saw on my shelves a weighty postal package wrapped in their usual mustard-brown hard-duty paper. I had no reason to open the parcel. What for? By its size and familiar weight, I knew what was inside. The annual report for the past 6 years of my life, comprising 472 typewritten pages of 35 short stories by W. S. Maugham, translated into Ukrainian.

Strangely, the posted parcel hadn't reached Konotop before I came back from Kiev. And it was also odd that the unopened package with unread stories left me so frostbitten indifferent.

> (...as it turned out, those 6 years did not fit into the feudally regulated grid of book publishing system.
>
> "Who sent you to our reality laid out in so nice rectangular way?"
>
> "Sorry, I've knocked on a wrong door..."
>
> Quoting the habitual byword from my Uncle Vadya: “Farewell, dear peers and peerixes, sirs and sirixes!”
>
> And he was a great connoisseur of vassal dependencies from *The History of Middle Ages* school textbook ...)

˜~˜~˜

˜ ˜ ˜ The Ivory Tower

Instead of a volume of short stories by W. S. Maugham in Ukrainian (a single copy from 150 000 published) a weighty parcel rested, dead as a doornail, on my shelves. All that depended on me for accomplishment of the undertaken project was done in full, which stripped my further living on of any goal whatsoever. Life still rolled along the rutted trail, even if aimless and unplanned already. However, when you drop asking the useless question "what for?", then a Thursday visit to the bathhouse with the steam room, concluded by 2 bottles of beer, would suffice to motivate living for another week. Marvel at monks in the Tibet, who rough it up there though deprived of even the mentioned stimulants.

In my, not quite Tibetan, yet well-structured way of life there felt an undeniable lack of carnal pleasures. I caught myself thinking this thought on the evening when, coming after work to 13 Decemberists, I cast the customary glance at the mingle-mangle crowd of shoes and slippers about the shoe shelf on the veranda. The in-depth self-interrogation, which followed the hot trail of the glance, made clear that my eyes attempted at zeroing in on the high-wedge Austrian high boots absent there. Of course, it was not the eyes' fault that made in Austria footwear was so

durable and unwilling to wear out from my recollections. Yet, what high boots might possibly come to the veranda in summertime, eh? And for what reason would she ever come to Konotop, let alone 13 Decemberists?. Such rhetorical questions helped to make me a laughing stock before myself, but could not prevent nightly ejaculations…

In the dead of night, my sleep was interrupted because I threw my head up and dropped it sharply onto the wooden armrest above my pillow in the folding coach-bed. However, the pain and blood from the broken eyebrow did not obscure the fact of soaked underpants. I peeled them off, used to wipe my loins, and threw behind the other armrest by the wallpapered wall, they could sit there till the morning. Then I got up, made a couple of steps thru the darkness to switch the lamp on the tabletop.

Bypassing the mirror on the way back, I averted my face – no good in adding this grim nudist to other blobs stored in its db—a toddler amazed by a too silent playmate behind the glass surface, a dude giving crick to his neck in a sidelong glance from his upturned face at his hair not yet reaching his shoulder blades, a young couple seated on the sunlit davenport fucking happily in the company of their reflections, soundless yet frisky. Out of the mirror's sight, I stooped and yanked the blanket aside. Hell! A damp dark spot blotted the wrinkled landscape in the crimson tablecloth, which since long had lost its fringe and become the folding coach-bed's cover.

"That's right," said I to myself. "That's exactly what you stole it for." Then I pulled, folded, and tucked the soaked spot so as to prevent body's contact to the jism, and lay back down to sleep the night thru.

"They are simply white spots

Those cryptic black holes…

...lure the quest to lose way in tornado-like whirlings…

...with the black semen splotches in the white of bedsheet..."

And also using public means of transportation in rush hours became a real trial at times. I did not mind being squeezed from all sides by passengers packed tightly in the streetcar to give you the shape of the concave quarry pip in the Ace of Diamonds, as long as they don't shove you against the rondure of a young female ass, which is grossly unfair. Damn! The situation fires up a breaker-like boner on your part, which fact can't be concealed by the raincoats on both of you. Yet, with no room to step back in the crowd of passengers pressed in like two barrels of herring into one, all there remains to do is just swaying together with the streetcar in its swift run and keeping a despondent stare stuck to the window, like, I have nothing to do with that swelled thing. But if not yours, then whose?

"Blessed be the curves and bends

And other twists of tramway tracks,

The accomplices of the sweetest touches,

Quite decent, almost accidental..."

It's hard to list all sorts of things exposing sexual starvation, shortened by the scientifically bent folks to the term "libido". And they highly recommend the application of that damned Libido medicine for those engaged in creative professions, like, to give a sharp rise to the engaging drive in your manufactures. But what the f-f..er..I mean, frolic was I supposed to do with that f-f..er..funky Libido, being neither Vincent van Gogh nor Walt Whitman?!. And that f-f..er..well, feverish libido could seize me suddenly not only in the means of public transportation, or in erotic nightmares, but even at the workplace. Only that at work, the creative orgasm was reachable without the physical erection.

For instance, during the finishing works at the 100-apartment block, an unfamiliar young plasterer seemed very attractive to me. A passing glance was quite enough to see the rural beauty's immunity to any intellectual pursuits, but the purity of the blush, the tempting outlines of her breasts and thighs (discernible even thru the deforming *spetzovka*) disarmed and captivated me so that I decided to gush up Song of Songs of my own, using the plasterer for a model...

Normally, the plastering works are started at a construction site after covering the floor slabs with the layer of expanded clay. Expanded clay is a good thermal insulation material, but it crunches underfoot until it is covered with the screed at the subsequent stages of finishing works.

Turning a couple of times to my cautious steps over the expanded clay—I neared the doorway to make the details of the supposed masterpiece more precise—the model asked Trepetilikha, who was plastering a jamb in the same room, "Could that bozo stole my trowel?"

"Not a chance," replied Trepetilikha. "This one if even stumbles on your trowel would never pilfer it."

Given the dimensions of my libido at that period, the new Song of Songs would have easily surpassed the Solomon's creation, and only the cynic suspicion of my involvement in the theft saved the world literature from the upcoming reassessment of all its values.

"From the highest cliff

Over the sea, blue and boundless,

Off I dumped my libido

To get rid of it

Yet... O, my!.

All of the vast blue sea

Drowned in my bluesy libido.

Oops!."

Hell!. Two divorces and three stretches in the Romny madhouse leave you with a damn slim prospect of developing a stable relationship, or any at all for that matter.

But you cannot lace up a blizzard... Good news, it's not whipping my face, but pushing from behind towards the station in the early morning twilight. Thick streams of snow pressed into dense mass by the squally wind drive the twilight back towards the darkness.

Knee-deep in snowdrifts I flounder on by the supposed service path alongside the railway track. The concrete pillars holding the contact wire above the rails serve the milestones not to get lost in the desert of floating snow. It's better not to look back – the stream of blinding snow instantly sticks like a chilly mask all over the face. Besides, there's nothing behind to look for – whatever has been there is just gone.

But why do I see her naked body as white as the churning white foam of this frenzied blizzard? And she's not alone – having a sex with someone. Not me…

I turn my face back to the snowy slaps, to wake up, not see. In my brain, I switch on the splashes of the organ from the House of Organ Music, they are tattered, crisp and not precise, yet distract...

... I must be a pervert indeed...no normal one would have a hardon watching his wife fucking somebody else midst this snowstorm...

...what wife? You don't have no wife!.

...okay, not wife then – the love of the lifetime...

...shut up, asshole!.

I shook my head in desperation and, with a groan, wandered on. A hard glancing blow from behind grazed at my left shoulder calling to order. The local train from Nezhyn making thru the blizzard for the station.

...the trains are always right, they don't have deviations...

...look, the blurred lights ahead, above the fourth platform...

...from there in the common throng makes thru the blizzard to the station square, to our Seagull...

...everything is okay, I'm just like everyone else…

~ ~ ~

In a late spring evening on the station square, someone had a breakdown. Maybe, the heart needed a time break or something, but the man collapsed onto the asphalt. However, the ambulance was quick and pulled up by when the females' "ah! oh!" were still floating over the small crowd around the vacationer.

Going to the railway station thru the Loony park, I missed the beginning and only watched the final act – the ambulance departure followed by dispersing of a group of people. However, the pedestal of the Lenin monument in the park was still sending back tiny echoes of "ah!" so reconstructing what had just been there was as easy as summing up 2 zeroes.

Along the alley opening to the square, one of the incident witnesses was nearing me, pensively pacing in the counter direction. When we get close to each other, she suddenly repeated "ah!" rehearsed shortly before, uplifted her arms, a kinda dancer in *The Swan Lake* ballet, and fell on me.

What else could I do? Naturally, I caught the fainter in her fall, by the armpits. Then I gentlemanly dragged the swoony swan onto the bench of green beams in the low wall of trimmed bushes.

She sat silently, her head bowed, and I gallantly kept shut up, in the same deep shadow under the tree blocking the light from the lamp up the alley. Seated next to her, I fed an inaudible sermon to myself on pointlessness of the slightest advances by a guy of my pitch-black past, especially in the city where everyone knew anyone else. Who'd need a goner's courting?. Who'd care for a mentally compromised freak let loose till next pinch up for a yearly session to get his head tweaked at the Romny madhouse?

When our reciprocal silence became too monotonous, she put her hand on my shoulder to say in a wearily meek tone of voice, "Thank you" and left the bench.

I dismally looked after the blurred spot of her long light cloak moving away up the alley, and I thought to myself: "Moron! Couldn't you prop the girl by your arm around her waist? And let her decide whether to put her head on your shoulder or say "don't!" and leave? No? You're too smart for that, you made the decision for both! Okay! Now stay with your fucking stream of consciousness, with your libido, and the endlessly long nights, like by that princess on a pea!"

"Had an encounter with Katya in the park, brother?"

"What's the buzz, Natasha?"

"Come on! Katya's from our accounts department. She told me herself how she nearly fainted in Loony and fell on you."

"She took me for someone else, or him for me."

"Stop fibbing to me!"

"I wish I were as lucky as that jackass with Katya-girlies dropping on him in parks!."

~ ~ ~

On the payday, I got off our Seagull at the bus station and turned into the post-office to send 30 & 30 alimony. Then I crossed Club Street back and proceeded alongside the Loony park towards the railway station.

"Hey! You're from The Orpheuses, right? Ogoltsoff?

...a young man of my age, heading to the station with a woman by his side, his wife, probably...
"Yes, it's me."

"Do I know you! You studied in Nezhyn and I knew your wife Olga!"

...no, never met him, and he was not alone to know Olga after she became my wife...

He looked around as if seeking some piece of hard and weighty rock to swat against my skull with. Then he pointed his finger at his companion who unswervingly stared aside.

"See? Got her teeth into and having me in all the holes!"

...yea, I see it alright, man, having it in all the holes... some relic from the antediluvian life... you wander around beset with snotty sorrows for the flute of Eera and they still pop up with their news bulletins on Olga...

"Yea, I see. Say 'hello' to my wife Olga."

"Damn! You're some f-f.. fool driver!"

Leaving them to each other, I turned off Club Street into the park along the walk coming up to the Loony Palace of Culture, but I bypassed it on the right and walked on behind the white back of Lenin to the side exit from the park, then past School 11 to the terminal of Streetcar 3 by the Under-Overpass. At Bazaar stop, Skully and Vladya boarded the streetcar.

"Hi!" said I. "How are you?"

Skully nodded warily and they both also said, "Hi!"

The rumbling streetcar was carrying us towards School 13. I gave a little chuckle.

"What are you laughing at, Sehrguey?" asked Skully with an unheard of correctness. That's some news! For the first time since we’ve met he called me by my name, skipping both my school and

lahbooh handles. Yes, and with that pompous circumspection, kinda lord-speaker addressing a peer from the opposition faction.

“Ah!. Just remembered Vladya's verse. Remember, Vladya? We were writing poems during classes. Once I composed a piece with Vladya in it; he was blowing the horn and clanging his sword in a battle with another knight. So he turned out an answer:

“Don't ever try

To put on me

The wreaths of military glory.

As for the bugle, I wasn't that horny…

But low and cozy in the ditch...”

"Well, now, do you remember, Vladya?"

He vaguely shrugged his shoulders and gave a so apologetic look to the passengers seated and standing around that it was clear right away, he did not keep any recollections of the sort. Not to strain my old bosom friends any longer, I got off by School 13…

On foot went I along Nezhyn Street, turned into Eugenia Bosh Street, and then into Kotovsky Street. My feet knew those streets by heart, I could fully trust them and, at leisure, think about this or that…

...the translator from Vsesvit was good at rendering that Czech's verses... now, how would it look in Russian, I wonder?...probably, something like...

"I walk and smile just to myself

And then the thought

'What would the people think of me?'

Turns quiet smiling in too loud a laughter..."

...no, in *Vsesvit* it's still better good job by the translator yet the Czech is a hugely better fellow and the Czechs in general are good fellows... if we for instance take Jan from the Bolshevik...

...stop! no poking the Bolshevik's ashes or else we'll have another turn of plaintive weeping to irrigate with bitter tears the dry and petrified sponge which for a year already kicks back dropped in the nook unreachable behind the fridge...

...but this Czech is good indeed... showed them all what the last will of a poet should look like... before him they turned out only primitive two-liners: ah, bury me so that in spring the nightingale's song will sound o'er my grave... but me, please, where the Dnieper's flow is heard from afar... base and selfish consumerism... go and learn from the laughing Czech... everything's instructive and to the point... starting with the tree kind whose roots will suck the juice from the buried body and pump it up right to the flowering twigs so that the bees collect the honey for young beauties to grease their buns when having tea for breakfast in their beds... that's a suave gallant for you! in his unblemished shining armors! who cares that I am dead? says he... it’s not a reason to deprive, he says, the customer ladies of our specialty delicacies!.. yet you can’t blame Czechoslovakia alone for his fanciful kinks because schizophrenia is supranational indestructible and indivisible... although time and again there pops up some or another defector like Freud who cinch their specific vision of the world into the cart of servicing their wallets and open Viennese schools... to keep the pot boiling... for scurvy metal he lost his chance to be a normal schizophrenic as free as the rest of us... the weakling got caught with the lime for dickhead suckers mind well sonny “the longer the line of zeroes in your bank account the cooler you are”... some complete hooey you get from them those zeroes, bro... yet the Cave-Mommy as ever feels so mighty comfortable for the blind... and with the final fall of curtain after the life spent among all kind of neurasthenic ladies with their hysterics and in a company of naphthalenized spiders of scientistical PhDs did you not ask your mug’s reflection in the looking-glass well what now Ziggy have your Poles helped you out?. give back my schizophrenia please set me free… yet what is freedom and how to see its fore from its behind?. as Peter Lysoon cares to put it... freedom from what?. and here you get fixed up with the straitjacket of national traditions... for the Brit Shakespeare it's freedom from time... the connection of times is broken describes he a petty clinical case... while in Ukrainian the very term denotes either separation from God Almighty or else can be interpreted as some incognito "free divine"... doesn't matter though since the existence of both freedom and God is beyond provability… and seeing that tether keeps back no longer whizzing ahead in frenzied rapture... still watch your step buddy the wild is good but smarting chill and wet... and here lies the whole dirty trick impossibility to both give the slip to the commandments getting away from all kind of safety regulations to keep the herd consolidated by and at the same time enjoy the goodies of the in-herd lifestyle with a warm female next to your side and cool vodka from the freezer, see?. more quirky task than cracking the circle quadrature you know...

...what's that? Decemberists Street? so soon? some gag... Mercutio was in the luck to have a friend like Romeo who would snap him back to earth in time... "peace, f-f..er..friend of mine, thou talk'st of nothing! watch around or you'll get over to Tsiolkovsky Street in no time!.""

...strange...why is Lenochka strolling in front of the gate?.

"Dad, you've got a visitor."

"What visitor?"

"I don't know, he says he's your friend."

With the chink of the handle-latch in the wicket, I entered the yard.

On the bench by the porch way, looking up at the lower branches in the Apple tree whose trunk served also the natural backrest, my visitor sat, aka my friend, blowing cigarette smoke up into the leaves.

"Hello, Twoic."

"Hi, Hooey-Pricker."

~ ~ ~

He arrived from the nearby Bakhmuch town in the neighboring Chernigov region by 17.15 local train and had to go back by the last one going in the Kiev direction. Before the departure, there remained not too much time, yet not too little either, and we strolled to the station in no hurry. On the way, we remembered the old golden times, and our mutual friends: Petyunya and Slavic. Twoic outlined, in general terms, their cases for the past period. With a sigh of consolation, he admitted knowing that all had gone wrong for me. Well, meanwhile, he graduated and, in agreement with his appointment, became the teacher of Chemistry in the Varvarovka village, 6 kilometers from his home.

Such fortunate appointment of my friend did not surprise me because in the era of deficits the Goods Manager at a district trading base (so his mother's position) had more influential leverage than that by the Secretary of District Party Committee.

At his workplace in the neighboring village of Varvarovka, everything was drowned in the hooch and only a remarkable specimen with genetic stamina in regard to homemade alcohol (thanks to Cossack ancestors) would have survived the constant submersion. The periods between educating the school kids were spent in friendly bouts with the local toughs of the district capital, the Bakhmuch town, and trips to Nezhyn to have sex with one or another of eager sluts at the student hostel.

Village teachers were exempt from the army draft, as well as persons over the twenty-seven-year-old limit. On reaching the specified age, Twoic realized that it was time for him to grow. A professor at the Nezhyn institute, fed tame with deficit goods from Twoic's mother's trading base, made protection at some research institute in Kiev.

“PhD student“! Each letter glittered with its individual halo. To get into the graduate school by the research institute, Twoic was prepared to pray whatever gods it gave there. Even after the Nezhyn professor brought his mother to the right person from the research institute and she held the necessary negotiations, Twoic still went to the Vladimir Cathedral where he said a prayer and did not stint for a twenty-kilo candle, and now, just in case, he came to Konotop to use me as well. After all, I was Hooey-Pricker, the Hosty elite, the rising star of the English Department, the bearer of the blessing, like Jacob, like Joseph...

> (...the devil only knows what blessedness is, but since Thomas Mann said it is around then, after all, it is...)

It looked like Hooey-Pricker had a nasty nosedive and spilled his blessedness, yet you never know, a drop or 2 could still remain. Why not to sprinkle the remnants on a friend like Twoic?

> (...he did not say a word about any drops though, and everything else after the point on the giant candle was cultivated in the hotbed of my feverish unhealthy fantasy...)

In the conclusion, Twoic went over to his projects for the nearest future and, without excessive hesitation, laid out the business plan, according to which I did not have anything to lose while he had a scientific career ahead of him, it only remained to get thru the graduate school. But, if in luck, there peeped a decent jackpot ahead... In short, one, like, a wise guy from Kiev wanted to buy a sack or 2 of cannabis. Reluctant to invite to his native village the visitor who might turn out an undercover operative, you never can tell, Twoic suggested me to sell it, at any other place convenient for the transaction.

The friendly offer made me feel somewhat melancholic, sort of. For political transgressions they gave forty-five-day vacation in Romny, but for how long would you be shut on the account of dope? And they could make you sleepy forever too... Yet, Twoic's general assessment of the current situation was to the point, I did not have anything to lose after the accomplishment of my Maugham plan. And I agreed.

On the second platform, we exchanged a farewell handshake: be it of help to you, my whilom friend, the aspersion with my drops, if any accidentally still tarried there. Do your graduate school the whole nine yards…

~ ~ ~

A telegram from Kiev awaited me on the table, "Saturday 12:30 metro by Railway Station guys also." It was not signed, which meant I was addressed by my friend, my reunited friend Twoic.

Any mail for me went to the shelves, but a telegram was received for the first time, and the text looked somewhat conspiratorial. That's why they put it under the desk lamp on the table, for me to see when I got back from work.

Since I kept as mute as fish to any questions from my parents, Lenochka was entrusted with the clarification. As usual, I kept to the evasively elusive style of Delphi Oracle in my responses, fully aware of the aggravated tension thickening in the silent kitchen and adjoining room.

"You have a telegram."

"Very interesting."

"Read it already?"

"What else do they do with telegrams?"

"From Kiev? Yes?"

"So it's printed here."

"And from whom?"

"It's not printed here."

"Are you going?"

"Going is not the only option if you have a hang glider."

Why was I showing off and making so much of mist atop the fog? Because I knew no other way to instill a taste for philosophical dialogues and play on words. How else could I reveal to her, a motherless girl, the eternal feminine secret: so that they wouldn't stop courting you – give, yet without giving? Usually, those meandering conversations were cut short by a busting blast of indignation from the kitchen, "Not tired of this nonsense? Get away from him!."

She was growing up a clever girl. And she knew how to maneuver, albeit still in a childish, naive, way. No wonder though, with the good training she underwent, especially from 3 to 5 when her mother disappeared suddenly, and her father was popping up only on weekends to say "hi!" before starting off to his friends.

On the weekday nights, drunk grandpa was snoring behind the wall and grandma, pissed off that he still managed to give her the slip, although at the end of working day they got to the RepBase check entrance together, and she had to go alone in crammed streetcars, and trudge the bags all by herself along the darkness and snowdrifts in the outskirt streets, would scream at the small girl wild threats of giving her away, the disgusting wretch, into an orphanage.

And it seemed to the frightened kid, it was not her granny, but Baba-Yaga, the crooked witch and mistress of the black blizzard, which scratched into the dark, ice-clad, windows, and all of them were against her, defenseless, five-year-old, wretch. Complains? To who? To hope for help? Where from?

So Lenochka learned to get along with her grandmother. She knew when to hug and how to kiss on the wrinkled cheek. And granny brought her cakes with custard filling from the "Cooking" store by the Under-Overpass. Yes, and she sewed for her everything with the Singer sewing machine.

And what good things did she see from her dad? Coming from work, he knew only to rustle pages in his book and even bought a desk lamp. Well, there were also those 30 rubles a month, yet they were just 30 rubles to the granny, while Granny insured her with the insurance and when she is 18 – here you are, Lenochka, get 2 000 rubles!

And whatever you asked, Granny could cook. She also knew all the gossip about her classmates, so that they always had something to talk about. However, when you asked what's happiness, or,

say, beauty, then daddy explained more interesting. And he knew how to praise a new haircut so that it felt ticklish all over with joy. But all the same, Granny's better…

My friend Twoic did correct calculations suggesting to meet at 12.30. By that time the first local train from Konotop arrived in Kiev. He did not consider one thing though, which was my disgust to be put in frames worked out not by me. So I came to Mother of Russian Cities two hours earlier, by an express train…

Leaving the railway station, I crossed its square full of traffic bustle, car-honking, clangs of streetcars, and leisurely strolled along the inclined plane of the wide empty sidewalk, towards a busy intersection in the distance...

Half a dozen gypsy women followed me into the first canteen after the crossing. Removing my raincoat and hat on the hanger in the corner, I almost regretted the coincidence because of which I had to wait before they selected their *havvage* and pull the trays to the checkout, echoing to each other in their dark language.

...calm down, there’s still a whale of a time...

However, the gypsies took a wait-and-see attitude and, glancing in turn at me, clearly refrained from going first. And that's a wise move too – to check which items on the menu were safe to eat that day.

"You're missing bread," grumbled the cashier after a look-see at my tray.

"No need."

With a shrug, she threw back a couple of beads on her abacus and accepted a well-chafed ruble-note.

Seated alone, I modestly kept my eyes down, at the cabbage salad in combination with a snack of custard cake and tried hard not to follow the news announcer in his coat and cap, broadcasting from a nearby table to feed his chewing companion the latest news of his world, where the day before someone swallowed way too much of noxiron and kicked the bucket. Some first-rate dinner gossip, yes, indeed.

Yet, the most stunning thing about this metropolitan newsmonger was that he repeated, word for word, the piece which already was no news in the provincial wild. Tower crane operator Vitalya shared it a week ago. Coincidence, or plagiarism?.

Intercepting my pensive glance, the announcer swelled in vanity, the owner of breathtaking sensation…

In the barbershop on the same street, there was no queue and, when I returned to the station, it remained half-hour before the appointment. The shoe shiner in a satin blue smock polished my shoes, flicking the ponderous anchors tattooed on the backs of his hands.

Instead of eyeing up the ladies that scurried past his booth to the women's toilet and back, I steadily looked at the gray of his head bowed to my knees. The mujik got fed up with that crying anomaly. "What are you gazing at?" he asked, putting off his brush and taking a plush cloth instead.

"I seem to like you."

"Bullshit!" he grumbled grimly. "Even I myself don't like me."

"We have different tastes then." And all the same, there still remained fifteen minutes…

I passed thru the immense lobby of the station, climbed up the white stone stairs to the second floor and, up there, rested my elbows on the wide white parapet over the grandiose hall dissolving high overhead into the twilight-filled void. Idly watched I the rough confusion of human particles in the Brownian movement swarming at the tiled bottom far below. About 5 minutes later, this tiny bit of me would mix with them, but now I was just looking down at the bustling fuss.

Their hasty streams thinned about the center of the lobby and, after bypassing it, they again became denser. The reason for the phenomenon was the athletic figure in a scarlet jacket walking there in unhurried circles. Waiting for someone. Whom? Not me. Nobody waits for me except for Twoic who, probably, right now is by the metro entrance checking the waves of the passengers from the neighboring Suburban Trains Station.

Ain't it funny? Here, in the main station, this burly block goes round and round, waiting for someone, while a bit shorter slob, Twoic, is circling now by the nearby, smaller, Suburban Trains Station, also in a state of expectation. If you extend this line, then somewhere still farther, say, at a streetcar terminal, there is a teenager waiting for somebody. And so on, just like that endless little man in a fire extinguisher on the staircase landing of the second floor in my kindergarten, the man in his cap from the somersaulting pictures who instilled the notion of infinity in me. That kindergarten "I" hadn't even heard the word "infinity", and only infinitely gazed at the fire extinguisher trying to understand: where did those men in caps go? That zany kid is me, who replaced him, and I will be replaced by other "I" because we all are finite unlike the little man in his cap…

Near the metro station, I rested my chin in the chest to hide my face under the tilted brim of the hat. My friend Twoic walked along the line of payphones in the wall, to and fro. He wore a freshly re-established mustache, a prestigious leather coat, the thinning hair and a somewhat surly pensive look in his countenance. There he turned and started back.

After catching up with him, I silently followed from behind. At the end of the row of phones, he turned again right to my grin: "Hi, Twoic. And where are the guys?"

"Hooey-Pricker!" He turned his broad face up and issued the characteristic Twoic's giggle, followed by that same taut sharp squint to snapshoot the situation: what and how?

After a blithe hug, he let me go and started up confused speculations on reasons that aborted coming of Petyunya and Slavic.

Waves of the freshly arrived crowd gurgled from the Suburban Trains Station inundating all of the sidewalk, making us to retreat to the wall.

Twoic gave up developing sketchy hypotheses about possible excuses for the absence of our dear friends, asked me for a 2-kopeck piece and began to spin the disk on a payphone, holding an open pocket notebook in his clutch. It's safer to have a blunt pencil than a sharp memory, as ran a KGB adage once shared to me by their brunette gallant...

Rucks of sundries floated by in the waves carrying mesh bags, suitcases, rolls of wallpaper, packages, boxes, buckets, bundles of pipes, briefcases, backpacks, seedlings, cornices, bird-cages and all other kinds of imaginable and exotic items, they flowed to the metro and to the stops of public transport of all types on the square, dashing fleeting looks at the pair of metropolitan tough guys.

The one with the broad leather back, spinning the phone disk, should be the boss, and the other, with a sticky gaze from under the lowered brim of his hat, a bodyguard. And although not everyone in the crowd knew such words as "boss" or "bodyguard", yet at the back of their collective mind, they shared common respect to those 2, at least for having their spines free of burden, and having where to call on the phone in the metropolitan city of Kiev.

How could they guess, that ever-flowing crowd, that Twoic was an upstart in the city, and I was a nothing-at-all called in by his telegram?. And, by the by, where's he calling? I had no idea, and it did not matter for I was just an instrument. There's always someone to decide for us, and my part always was to execute the orders…

~ ~ ~

A year before, Twoic became a graduate student and now paced along the straight path to PhD. His scholarship was higher than that of undergraduate students, yet not enough to meet expenses for divers temptations pervading the big city life. Okay, there were no problems with clothing, because his mom controlled a district trading base. Food also was not a pressing issue, coming back from weekend visits to his native village, Twoic fetched *torbas* tearing the hands off by their weight. Yet, for all that manna from heaven he had to pay in kind by the exposure to the parental chewing his ear off with their twits for a diffused lifestyle, and working thru all the weekend: digging, manuring, hauling, pulling in the garden and about the *khutta*.

Twoic had enough health and strength to make the sport of farmer's chores. And he especially liked hauling something weighty and bulky – armfuls, bundles, sacks with a harvest from the garden to the shed. Raking up the muck in the pig stall, or from under the bull calf, was not as pleasant, but also a job he was used to. Quoting the old priest from their village, "Where there's

muck, there's lard". However, the mom's moans and lamentations about the Kiev whores, who rob and eat off the goof of her sonny, were more than enough to make even a saint see red. That's why Twoic needed ready money, but where to get it, was a tricky question.

Unloading freight cars at the station as in the student years seemed below a graduate student level. Besides, he was a skilled workforce at playing Preferans. The game was pure Arithmetic, and in his curriculum vitae, Twoic had 2 years at a mathematical special school, plus the feel of whether a player was bluffing or having a good hand indeed. And there also, last but not least at Preferans, was Twoic's appearance of a natural hick, putting opponents off track.

However, the hostel was too shallow waters. You ripped your neighbors for a fiver once or twice, and they started shying you. Everyone grew so awfully busy, no time for a pool at all, yet between themselves, they went on playing. Yes, behind the locked door in someone's room, a kopeck per trick, so mean misers. Still and all, somewhere, someplace there had to be the upper crust, the elite. It was the capital, after all. Playing by candlelight, on the green cloth, with a freshly unsealed deck, and the trick no less than fifty kopecks, that was his dream. But how could you reach the upper crust without money?

All that brought Twoic to designing sundry romantic plans for getting a jackpot… The initial plan to become a drug trafficking baron in the cannabis market somehow withered by itself. It was followed by a plan to make friends with some of the foreigners scudding thru the capital, to establish a stable barter trade for clothes smuggled from outside the Iron Curtain... That's when he called me to use as a productive tool at the operational end. And since then I entered into the service to Twoic on quite acceptable terms if you don't care a f-f..er.. a frigging flick anymore about anything at all...

Prospective business with foreigners did not prosper either. On the day of the attempt at acquiring a suitable acquaintance, there sounded only Roman languages on the sidewalks of Khreshchatyk. It was no use to approach such passers-by with my English of Nezhyn make.

2 times Twoic hallooed me at different twos of Negroes in slouch hats. However, the targets in response to my cheerful, "Hi! let's have a talk!" shied, for some reason, and kept mum. Probably, they had already experienced invitations "to go out for a talk" at some or another of dance-floors. I had to explain to Boss that they were Negroes from some of former French colonies, so English did not click with them.

The futile hunt seemed to wear Twoic or, maybe, he decided to think over another new plan, anyway Massa got seated tightly on a bench in the University greens and allocated me 2 hours for an uncontrolled free search. The task did not seem too attractive, but I had to work off the grub, both consumed that morning (buns and Pepsi) and upcoming. So, leaving him thoughtful on the bench, I did not shirk my duty in any way and kept the ears pricked up for anyone uttering something in Shakespearean parlance from any side. On Shevchenko Boulevard a group of neat men, passing the Vladimir Cathedral, referred to it as "cathedral". Might it be?.

"No," one of them explained in Russian, "we are speaking in Latvian."

I felt fed up. Okay, one more last try at The Intourist hotel and that's it... On the wide porch in front of the glazed entrance, a burly block with a saxophone string around his neck asked politely what I needed. They kept some naive bulldog at the establishment. How could I—a foreign tourist—possibly knew all those local dialects? On an indulgent survey of the two-meter tall aboriginal, I, without a word of comment, went over in and turned to the left where the bar was.

The inscription in English asked to pay in local currency only and notified that the current day of the week was a day off. Yes, it's time to have a rest... The massive-looking chairs by polished tables turned out very responsive and tremendously comfortable. My loyalty got rewarded, had I been shirking I wouldn't enjoy such a soft seat; much better than the hard bench planks accommodating Twoic.

At the far end of the bar enjoying its day off, there loosely sat 12 she-apostles and their black-bearded Teacher with his fervent sermon of the truest truth. What's their language, by the by? They should know better. Okay, when reporting Twoic, I'd mention coming across a non-governmental delegation of poultry farmers from Romania.

Separated from me by a vacant table, two Germanly colorless girls exchange brief clues over the empty top of their table, while doing their level best at keeping their looks off me. Damn that f-f..er..I mean, fundamental language barrier. The chicks were bored. It would be manna for them to hear, "You're cute and I'm cool, besides, I have a friend named Twoic. How about to dump the boredom in a party of 4?." But they would hear nothing of the kind because of the obnoxious language prison, they're locked up in their cell, and I in mine. We don't even look at each other, like sage foxes ignoring unattainable grapes. But they at least could prattle between themselves, while I stayed some deaf and dumb.

"An o'fooly nais plais," informed I the girls urbanely, "ain't it? Baat (with a slight sigh of disappointment) nahbady to have a tauk wid!" And I gave a gallant nod to their amazed gazes, "Bye-bye!."

~ ~ ~

For the period elapsed since that hunt, no jackpot had ever turned up, yet Twoic liked having me about because I was not only a relic of his student life but also a docile tool all ready, like a young pioneer, for anything. So, after the first telegram, there followed similarly curt ones, just the village name and the weekend date for me to show up. It took a half-hour ride to get from Konotop to Bakhmuch by a local train, and then ten more minutes by bus.

"What's the news about you each weekend getting on a train with flowers? Visiting your wife or what? But you're, like, divorced."

"Visiting a friend in the country. The flowers are for his mom and grandmother." "

"Are there no flowers in the village?"

Yes, they were there, yet much more than flowers there was work waiting for my arrival. Repairing the roof, constructing a barn, turning dirt in the garden. After the work, of course, hooch, gobble up to your heart's content. However, without the flowers, I'd be like a farmhand there, while a bouquet in my hands, like, turned me into a guest, sort of…

The house of Twoic's parents stood on the village outskirts in a narrow lane named Shore. The lane narrowness resulted not from its layout but was dictated by the dense fruit trees overhanging the fences from both sides. The house, of course, was called *khutta*, yet, in terms of quality, it was still a house. Between the gate and the *khutta*, there was a well behind a low palisade to the left, with water at just 2 meters down the concrete 1.5 meter rings, with a tin roof over the pail chained to the windlass. On the right, there stretched the whitewashed brick wall of the structure comprising anything – a summer kitchen, whose porch way almost closed with the steps in the high porch to *khutta*'s veranda, a garage for a car that still had to be bought, a tool store, a shed. However, the entrance to the barn was not from the yard but from the back of that building.

Passing between the two porches, you found yourself in the backyard with one more shed of timber for goats, chickens, pigs, and anything else. Under the windows of the *khutta*, there grew raspberry bounded by half-dozen of Apple trees and, still farther, the huge vegetable garden beyond which there opened an even field followed by the distant windbreak belt hiding the railway. The collective farm did not use that field because of abnormally high subsoil moisture. The folks on Shore lived in a big style indeed…

The house was ruled by Raissa Alexandrovna, Twoic's mother, because her husband, Sehrguey, was, for the most part, engaged in the housework and he didn't have much time for yakking. Of course, when something really put his back up, he could address his wife with a loud appeal to shut up her bunghole. Then Raissa Alexandrovna would pause, bite her lower lip and act a dull and dumb villager, however, all that was a pure theatricality – in 5 minutes the phone on the veranda would ring up asking for Raissa, not Sehrguey.

Apart from the domestic affairs, she ran the local politics, accepting several visitors a day, both on an appointment and without it. Her favorite scenic image was that of a folksy rural woman beset with all kinds of troubles and worries, in a quilted waistcoat and weathered kerchief on her black hair, and only the irony in the look of her black eyes did not fit the disguise. She knew how to artfully tie her kerchief, re-arranging its appearance several times a day. The knot changed its position from the forehead to under the back of her head, or else above the ear—the gypsy style—depending on whom Raissa Alexandrovna was going to let in. For the current visitor (in his jeans, long hair and the beard like that of a hippie from Los Angeles) she unexpectedly got it tied under her chin. Then Twoic told me it was the young priest at their village.

The hippie priest left and, in half-hour, a Zhiguli car pulled up by the gate and a young, extremely loud, woman in awful need of "a gown, eh?!." entered the yard. Raissa Alexandrovna took her to the veranda and was humbly making her brains for at least 40 minutes before sending away with a promise of that "a gown, eh?". She did not sell things at home, to accomplish the transaction the visitor had to visit the trade base if only the negotiations ended positively.

Raissa winked at Twoic and me after the retiring priest's wife, blissful Mother, and crossed her face with a thumb. Holy, holy, holy! But then she decided that we had spent way too much time playing cards on the porch step, and ordered us back to the garden to turn the dirt, or spread the muck, hauling it there in the handcart whose wheels kept sticking deeply into the black soil on the way, or to collect the corn ears…

However, when I and Twoic were erecting another barn of logs, we were out of her jurisdiction – Sehrguey had announced a smoke break that's why we were playing... The food after work was not a *havvage* but a bounteous rural grub on lavish fat, with dill aroma, mouthwatering whiffs of steam over the plates, and a bunch of crispy green onion studded with fresh water drops, on a dish in the table center.

The chef cook in the *khutta* was Grandma Oolya who cooked delicious things with just one hand, the other, since long paralyzed, she kept in the pocket on the stomach of her apron. And distilling hooch was also her responsibility because she liked to watch the product dripping into the vessel set beneath the tube…

I liked that kind of life more than sunbathing on the Seim beach sand. I liked the energetic one-legged neighbor Vityouk, the experienced player at the Throw-in Fool. And even more, I liked Ganya, the sister of Raissa Alexandrovna. There was no acting or irony about Ganya, she was calm and attentive, and she understood everything. I was sorry that she had cancer.

Doctors recently removed "the pea" out her belly, and on her coming back home the loving hubby did not give her no peace until she let him see the fresh gash from the surgical knife. I knew that she would not survive because at renovating the stove in her *khutta* all the firebricks from the old one were quite rotten. Yet, I was told to use the bricks again all the same – there were no others, but I could see that it was not for long...

They buried her in my absence, with heart-rending lamentations at the funeral, Raissa was held from both sides to stop her falling onto the fresh grave of her sister with wild embraces and sobs. When they were taking her from the cemetery, the old villager women yelled at her and other mourners: "So what? Cried Ganya out? Returned?" Twoic was very indignant describing their cruel brutality but, in my opinion, that was primordial psychotherapy and one of the rituals in the continuous comedy of life…

At my next visit, the husband of the deceased was also sitting under the black Mulberry tree in the *khutta*'s yard. At first, I could not guess where those tiny sounds were coming from. I thought some puppy sneaked into the yard, but it was the widower's whining. Such a burly man, a bus driver, the tears flowed down his cheeks and he did not even try to hide them. If all of them together could not call her back, what's the chance of you doing it single-handed?.

Ganya's son, a guy about 14, was at war with Twoic because he fell in love with Twoic's wife, but then Twoic divorced her, offended the beloved of the youth, sort of. For me, it was complete news that he got married and divorced, but Twoic said, yes, a Jewish girl from the Biology Department.

He also told that his father-in-law, when visiting people, after the first shot of vodka used to grab lard for a snack, sort of to demonstrate that he was not from kosher upholders. Now the ex-father-in-law would raise Twoic's son as he pleased, up to making him a strict Orthodox Jew under the most Ukrainian of all last names. And Twoic sighed at this point in the best traditions of the Moscow Artistic Academic Theater.

Raissa Alexandrovna did not allow time for Twoic's grief though, she shouted from the phone in the veranda that he had to change into clean clothes because they were bringing an aspirant bride for the "evaluating look". The loving mother did her best to find him a good party from among local girls, for which reason they periodically were brought to Shore, otherwise, them those Kiev whores would surely bamboozle the dumbo of her sonny. Twoic said inaudible "fuck!" and went to change.

Soon behind the gates, a car was heard and a pair of parents led their elegantly donned girl into the *khutta*... I stayed alone on the porch way to the summer kitchen, but then a visitor joined me. Some old man bent literally into an arc. When standing, he couldn't see the face of a man before him, only up to the waist.

We started a desultory talk, and the old man confessed that once he was a young and well-proportioned rural clerk, sporting a military tunic and high boots. The collectivization began and, with the clerk's participation, they were making lists of those to be deported to the Siberia. Now he was not able to look into the eyes of people around him.

And, after all, all was to no purpose. The grandsons of the misers, who at that time got keys and seals of the village council, were now penniless drunks, and the descendants of the robbed and exiled returned from the Siberia and got prosperous again. Because on such a soil only a lazy fool lives poorly... Raissa never showed up and he left, leaning on two short sticks in his hands, gazing at the sand under his feet that walked the road.

> (...as it turns out, the theft of a crimson tablecloth is not the worst thing that can happen to you, there are things for which you punish yourself much more severely...)

~ ~ ~

Then Sehrguey came up with the major project of paneling the *khutta*'s base with bricks, which he had prepared for several years already. It took me three-weekend visits because the *khutta* was not a small size. Twoic worked as a bricklayer's mate preparing the mortar and fetching the bricks up... We finished on a Saturday. Next morning, I got up first and went out on the veranda porch. My shoes stood on the second step with their noses directed towards the gate, although in the evening I left them exactly the opposite.

> (...some signs I can read easily –
>
> ***"the Moor has done his job..."...)***

I put my shoes on, walked out of the gate and, on reaching the end of the lane, turned to the windbreak belt because in its clearings a very slow freight train was clanging along. I strode fast, and then I had to run but in the end I managed to jump on the brake platform of the rear car.

(...everything turns out as it should when you have read it right...)

The freight train picked up speed and passed Bakhmuch station without stopping. People at the platform looked in surprise after the freight train. On the brake platform, I was standing happy and pleased with myself, my hair played with by the wind, sort of a tramp by Jack London…

In winter village chores come to a standstill and Twoic sent me a telegram only in April. We were turning dirt in the garden when his father brought the news about the Chernobyl explosion. The day was cold and windy, the gray clouds flew low. Twoic started a lecture about radiation but I did not care a fuck. What's the difference? However, the wind blew from East and did not let the radiation to reach the village. The clouds absorbed it and took over as far as Scotland, to the laundry hung there on clotheslines. Of course, the Scots had then to throw away that washing, so *Morning Star*…

But all that would happen later but presently Twoic, leaning against the wall by the payphone, dialed the number, and I scanned the endless flow of hustling crowd, which had no idea about the subtleties in relations between mafia bosses and their bodyguards. And I tried to figure out who of us was more interested in this friendship. Was it the would-be PhD Twoic, or I, his genie from a bottle?

It's a dumb thing to do psychoanalysis having no know-how from the trade... At Psychology lectures in the pedagogical institute, they, of course, shared that it was some mean presumptuous invention of the decaying West called to degrade and belie the capitalized name of Man which sounds proudly. A sad pity, the lecturers uttered not a word about methods in that indecency. Thus, we've got no other option but invent the content for the Psychoanalysis thing and work its methods out by ourselves.

Swing your arm, push your shoulder against it – we'll start this bitch of a collider manually!.

(...let's assume, the essence of such an analysis is to answer the dirtiest of all the questions—that of "why?"...)

So, why am I stuck with Twoic? For which reason? The healthy village food performed by his grandmother? Absolutely, yes. Carrying the flowers on a local train, I do look forward to enjoying the meals. Besides, there is one more alluring bait that I strive to with no chance of getting it though, like the ass ridden by Till Eulenspiegel. For any kind of ass, you'll find the sort of grass he will run after like a good little boy. So which one am I after?

The wild descriptions of sex orgies, generously shared by Twoic, keep glowing the embers of hope that I, his loyal servant, will get some crumbs off the master's bed. Say, some slut girlfriend of another whore of his. The dreams do not come true yet, but who says the ass should ever reach the grass? It's a smart ass, and he doesn't give even a sidelong glance at the bunch of grass

dangling in front of his nose. He pretends not seeing it even point-blank, and he trots after it just so, for the sake of warm-up, because he adores physical exercises and other agricultural works. Yet, to see what, actually, an ass is up to, you don't need to be as wise as Solomon himself…

Just for the record, there was an attempt at "with a girlfriend's girlfriend"... They came from Nezhyn to Bakhmuch, the ex-lover of Twoic and her girlfriend. Twoic and I met them and took to the village by bus. 2 mattresses were spread in advance over the dry hay in the loft over the summer kitchen. Out of delicacy, Twoic took his ex-lover to the nearby grove, leaving the whole loft for me to use it in undivided mode.

The chick was appetizing – slender and busty but she undressed only down to her pantyhose. No doubt, the modish black fishnet item made her legs look even prettier, but what the fuck I needed that mesh for? The same old acquaintance of a dirty trick – welcome on upper dangles, but no horsing about the chastity belt. I did not try at tearing the pantyhose to shreds, and all attempts at stirring up a reciprocal flame of passion in the teaser fell flat. The state of stalemate was sustained until Twoic brought back his ex-lover from the romantic walk to the grove…

Next morning, I got up first and went for a swim in the *kopanka* – a pond of about 20 by 20 meters dug in the field by a back-hoe. When I returned, Raissa Alexandrovna was sitting on the veranda porch.

"So how was the water?" she asked with the hint in her ironic black eyes.

"Cold," answered I in all the senses.

After breakfast, already without Raissa around, Twoic asked directly, "Well, how?"

"No hows. We're incompatible."

"How that?"

"She wanted being raped, I wanted to get a shared pleasure. The 2 things just do not click together."

Now, everything that keeps me on Twoic's leash boils down to the needs of my stomach, and that of the reproductive organ and... and is that all?. We need something else here, thinking in only 2 dimensions seems not enough for a Hegelian... Where is the third?! Spit it out!. A-aha! Here it is – the brain! The brain with its lofty aspirations and, first of all, the need to pour out the crap crammed into it, to ease the tension in the storage cells so as not to burst sending its gray matter in every thinkable direction. Ain't it a torture – be full of pearls but having no one to spill the goods in front of?

> (...who would decline the role of Mentor? Feeding the pearls of wisdom into the oral orifice of a naively gaping youth...)

Twoic presented me with that opportunity also, by his questions. How to choose the right route in the jungle of a research institute laboratory squabbles, where each spider for himself in the common jar, one for all? Who's more practical for your scientific career – a talented but alcoholic Micro-Chief, aka the manager of the laboratory, or the dull as 2 felt boots together Macro-Chief in charge of the institute department? Who of the two to choose for your Master?

Answering these and similar questions, I was amazed by the largeness of reprobate Machiavellianism stockpiled in me. I wouldn't ever dream of having so vast resources, communication with Twoic brought into the light the cached stash.

However, the essence of my maxims was so plain that Twoic sensed all of that himself and instinctively conformed to even before my broadcasting. It's only he couldn't put it to words that we get landed into this world where everything is occupied already—"the house's sold out!"—which situation calls for snatching a place under the sun for our dearest selves, and the end justifies the means, so… And Twoic was all too happy to agree. But what about me? Do I live by this sermon? Do I follow it, eat it out?

> (...following your own theories is not the must though. Nietzsche, the inventor of superman in the form of a "blond beast", was himself a physically miserable nuisance.
>
> "Snap a place under the sun for yourself," proclaimed I, that's true. However, as far as I'm concerned, I'd sooner drift away in search for the sun attainable in a more humane way, avoiding their scrimmage...)

Well, now, are you happy with your self-psychoanalyzing? Got all the nooks turned inside out? Don't be shy, we are alone – Twoic's too busy with dialing and checking his pocket notebook. So, is that it? The orgies for your stomach plus hopes for getting a second-hand whore, and tickling your vanity by spilling intellectual pearls? Is it the full list of reasons why I'm with him?

Well, that's why, definitely, yes... And also because of the feeling of freedom, when I break loose from the routine of my ordered, polished, clockwork way of life with the bath-going on Thursdays, washing on Mondays, ironing on Tuesdays, with the beach or reading room on weekends and the ever-present feeling of voided privation, and never ending vigilance…

Wow! As I see, you now flashed your love for freedom too, well done! And, hopefully, is that all?

Of course, yes, is not all of that enough for a sincere friendship?

Don't try to cheat the dialectics. You have omitted the opposite force – hatred.

And why should I hate him? He feeds me, provides drinking, presents an outlet to escape...

Seems like, in your enumeration, you bashfully omitted the opportunity to practice masochism, eh? What is a pleasure if not some sweet pain?

...had he slept with her or not?.. everything in me contracts into a tight tangle of scorching pain and slowly dissolves in mute shrieks: no, it cannot be.. but if?. and the pangs grip anew to be followed by numb warmth spilling over the innards: no, no, no…

At one of my first visits to the Twoic's village, we were sitting at the bus stop by the wide empty square in the tight breeze beneath the warm stars of a summertime night. The whitewashed walls in the stop-shed, as well as the planks of the benches, were stamped with inscriptions and cuts of all kinds of Deep Purples, Dynamos, Svetas, Blitzes, Vovas, and lots of dates... All of a sudden, Twoic spoke of Eera, "She said she had never had a better sex than with you."

That compliment, sort of, scalped me. They do not come up with such confessions at a café table. For such a subject, you should lie together in one bed after having a sex. Did she count on Twoic someday would deliver these words to me and I recreate the whole picture? No, a combination of too many moves… she's not a Bobby Fisher… Sooner, the feline female custom of branding their fuckers by marks of scratching talons... That's why he reached then out for a cigarette of Belomor-Canal...

...don't succumb to complexes, Twoic, I've never been a sex prodigy... and now I know why he found me in Konotop... and I am sorry for the helpless babble about blessing drops... he came then with much more trivial agenda – to urinate over the ashes of his dear friend, Hooey-Pricker, and stop feeling envious even *post mortem*...

He somehow felt that he had blurted out a bit too much and, to efface it, started swearing that he had never in his life had anything with Eera... As if I asked him whether it was so.

(...if you pretend to be a stupid ass for too long then, at times, you become it...)

"Have you ever beat her?" he asked a little later.

Oops, so she shared about that slap too.

"I hit just once, at the final date," reported I, "but it was a light spank, solely to comply with the protocol."

Twoic laughed his endemic laughter…

The next morning, we went for a swim in *kopanka*. I did not feel like entering the water, so I just walked around the pond and lay on the beach.

Twoic swam it from end to end. His blue eyes radiated a melting glow of satisfaction when he came ashore nearby me with water trickles dripping from his trunks.

"This look was in his eyes when getting off her," thought I. The thought brought pain and even though not so acute as I expected, yet more replete than I would like…

~ ~ ~

She approached me on the beach and started a talk about the *Morning Star* dropped on the sand next to the pink coverlet on which I was sitting. If I really read or it was it just a trick to lure girls. What that big article was about, for example.

So, I had to retell for the examiner what happened to a 19-year-old youth, a member of the family of smugglers. They regularly flew from Pakistan to England, swallowing a heap of small tight packages before the flight. Stomach served an ideal repository, the specially trained controller dogs at airports couldn't sniff out any drugs. Upon arrival, at a safe house in London, the whole family underwent the stomach lavage and—rah-rah-rah!—congrats on the successful shipping.

The fizzle happened on the flight when one of the small packages burst in the stomach of the young man. They used to tamp too much into one package and, on the arrival, the guy was taken from the aircraft straight to the hospital with a severe overdose. They washed the drugs out of his stomach and saved his life. And that was the end to the family business. Some sad, in general, story…

She sympathized and shared that she was also a nurse... Basically, a good profession for a girl about 30, who did not look a movie star, yet everything else was in place. My trunks could witness to the fact because, when finishing the story, I had to pull my knees up to my chin to look like a civilized gentleman and not a heated gorilla in the zoo.

Then everything went on like in a fairy tale, she told me her address in At-Seven-Winds, and we arranged my coming to her place on Tuesday with a visit of friendship and reciprocal understanding. She strolled away along the sandy beach, and I had to stretch out on my stomach, so as not to attract the public attention by my swimming trunks stuck out in anticipation of the day after tomorrow...

That day came at last and, after work, I rode from the station square to City. In The Flowers shop there happened nothing to my liking and I had to buy a kinda crossbred of daisies and sunflower. There still remained a hell of a lot of time before the appointed hour, so I took a walk back to the station and then along Club Street to At-Seven-Winds.

In Zelenchuk Area, Vladimir Gavkalov, the truck crane operator from SMP-615, who looked like Eera's brother Igor, crossed my path.

"Sehryoga!" yelled he on the run, "You've lost your way! The bathhouse's in the counter direction!"

I did not like that whisker of a bouquet myself but valiantly carried it on.

And all the same, up to At-Seven-Winds I got half-hour ahead of time and decided to keep my long-standing promise to myself that one of those days I'd come on a visit to that family of tall Birch trees in the vast area of construction sites... Following the trail trod in the tall grass, I approached the group of the white-trunk beauties.

Stupid bitches! The tenants from the nearest street who made a garbage dump under the trees... Scrunched between the closing in cloud layers, the sun went down like a bulb, without a sunset. Clenching my teeth at the ugly discovery, I took my stupid bouquet to the address, for the principle's sake.

"Oh!" she said. "Even with flowers!"

And I, both immediately and too late, got it that it should have been vodka... Then we chattered about nothing in the kitchen of her one-room flat. After tea, there happened an incident – the big jar of strawberry jam slipped from her hands and thwacked against the floor. It took her a considerable time to collect the large sticky puddle and wash the floor in the kitchen.

At about eleven she started sending me home. I had to drive a fool that everything there was locked and latched already, and the wolfhounds set free to run around. She, like, took pity and granted me half of her double bed, on the condition that I would behave.

When she put the light out and also lay down, I endeavored to continue the relationship in the most natural way, which move was met with unyielding resistance. I would never learn nothing! Did she call me for to wallow in demonstration of her chastity? I dropped trying and felt I didn't really care, just like about that sealed post package on my bookshelves.

...probably because the loss of jam was too great a shock... the three-liter jar would have seen her for at least thru half the winter... or maybe an ominous sign for the superstitious… and I don't care those morons have made their stupid dump there… when from one or another construction site I watched them waving at me it somehow eased... like a promise of something nice... when they eventually will cut them down and replace with a five-story block the trees will all the same be waving their tops like saying "Hi!" thru the heat haze... it will stay by me while those smarties remain stuck in their garbage heap for life...

In the dead of night, I awoke because light cautious fingers were feeling my cock thru the underpants. The nurse, after the failure to get raped, was checking why so. She'd better ask the sand on the Seim beach... But those frisking fingers of a stranger checking my flesh... It had already been somewhere... Only I couldn't recollect where and when before falling asleep again.

In the morning I left, declining the proposed tea with sugar. What was her name? She should have one anyway... it was some easy name, yes, sure... see? I even snap my fingers... now... well... er... perhaps... something like... mmm... yes…

~ ~ ~

The dance-floor in the Central Park of Recreation was all that still remained there for me. And I visited it not as a belated shooter in search for lame game but simply to get blues. A session of nostalgia priced 50 kopecks.

I was one of the first to enter the round enclosure of the dance-floor and get seated onto the timber bench of beams running along the tall pipe-grates in the peeling-off coat of silver-gray.

The large black boxes of the loudspeakers on the stage thundered with trendy records because "live" music became bygones. Between the numbers some, like, DJ switched the mike on and announced what had just been played and what was coming next. At times, he attempted at making a clumsy cockamamie joke, fortunately, not too often.

I sat quietly, the back of my head leaned against the iron pipe in the fencing. The twilight closed in but high in the sky the flocks of swifts still revolved beneath the clouds touched by the parting sun rays. I recollected their carousel on that day when you turned one month old, and we brought you for a checkup in the children's polyclinic, in the hand-me-down carriage under the tulle cover to throw off the evil eye. Only those swifts kept chirping shrilly when circling above the roof of the department store, while these near the fading clouds were not heard because of being so far and high.

Then the sky became dark, the night fell, and I still sat on the bench and never danced because I knew my place which was among the other thirty-and-over-year-olds outside, under the lamp in the nearby alley. You might stop there for a couple of minutes to watch the jumping joy of the next generation before going back to your settled life with a davenport opposite the TV…

I sat quietly as becomes a foreign particle, listened to the music and watched, point-blank, the young stock mass getting gradually denser in front of the bench... that girl's neck is longer than that of Nefertiti... very nice, like a lithe stem of dandelion... And I admired it without getting aroused. Then she did not show up for a couple of weekends before coming back with her neck drooped guiltily and obviously shortened, and I knew that she got cut off at the entrance examinations to an institute...

At eleven, in the general throng, I left the park for the streetcar stop by Peace Square. Those who lived closer diverged from the common flow in pairs and groups. People from far-off neighborhoods discussed: to wait or not to wait? Streetcars at that time of day were an *avis rara*...

Once the stop was occupied by a glass-eyed mujik of about 40. He eyed the approaching youngsters with a scornful stare, akimbo, his palms on his buttocks, in the attitude of a Nazi officer by the death camp gate bearing the inscription "Forget all hope you who come in here". The scared pairs and small companies got silent and bypassed him to timidly cram in the remaining half of the long stop. Triumphantly stood he, feet planted wide apart into the conquered living space alongside the track rails...

I stopped in front of the victor, barely two meters away.

...so, *Sturmbahnfuhrer*, dueling of attitudes, eh?.

Mine came all of itself, from the newsreels of the Victory Parade in Moscow, 1945. Besides the dumping fascist banners to the Lenin Mausoleum, there were also footage stretches filming civilians, girls for the most part with their faces so sad. Almost all of those girls from the past assumed the same posture – their left arms hanging alongside the body, the right raised across the stomach to grip the left elbow.

Facing the glass-eyed, I replicated their stance. Only my right hand was clutching higher than by those sad girls, around my left biceps and because of that my hanging down left arm became a kinda trunk already, sort of a dangling proboscis at rest. The opponent was not fit to withstand even 1 minute. He dropped his head in desperation, clasped his hands behind over his butt in the traditional *zek* attitude, and began to pace in shortened steps across the asphalted width of the stop, as far as the walls of invisible cell let him go.

The young folks were amazed at the ease of my victory over the cockroach, and they began to fill the whole stop, taking note for the future, that know-how is power... Yet, to be honest, my deed was pure improvisation, a flukey present from my generation to theirs…

~ ~ ~

Over and over again, clattering wheels beneath the floor rock the car in shallow sways, the local train carries me away from Konotop... But where, by the way, am I going? By all that black-ink darkness outside the window, it’s a late local train, so my trip is no farther than to Nezhyn, which means I’m paying another visit to Zhomnir...

My fuzzy reflection in the doubly-glazed window nods dimly in time with the rhythm of tapping against the rail joints: yea-to-him-and-no-where-else... Why do I go there? Well, probably, there is some reason… Say, typing with his typewriter another story, or maybe a couple of verses...

(...how can I now recollect from such a distance?..)

But all that's nothing but a downright smoke screen, and there's no use to tell lies to oneself. In fact, I am going to feel, again and again, the aching longing for the lost irreversibly. I am going to torture myself on the bank of invisible river, that same river in which, eternity before, there splashed a ripple where I loved and was loved in response... That's why the train rumbles along, thru the night, and in one of its cars I'm sitting on the edge of a three-person seat, while my briefcase basks impudently, smack in the middle of it.

It's a rare occasion when the car is empty; well, almost so. About 20 meters from my place, in a seat on the same side from the aisle, a girl is sitting. Because of riding backward, she’s facing me with her head leaned against the black window glass. At such a distance I cannot make out the features of her face, it's just a girl, alone in an empty car of a night train, with a bob cut of blond hair. She does not care about my presence, but looks quietly thru the window, where the picture of nocturnal darkness is sweeping by behind the dim reflection of the lamps in the ceiling of the empty car. Of course, it is empty. I am of no account, I sit quietly in the distance and do not stare at her at all. My absent gaze is directed along the aisle into the empty car vestibule behind the glass of the sliding door, trembling and quaking in time with the thuds of train wheels. Though such an attitude doesn't, of course, prevent a sentimental corner of my eye from catching the outline of her blond head and the upper part of her shoulders visible above the series of the seat-backs separating us. Just two in an empty car rushing thru the night...

But—lo!—she wakes up from her sad stupor. The right hand touches her blond haircut. She turns a bit deeper to the window, demonstrating her profile, and then looks straight ahead with her face turned to me.

From my place, I can't see where exactly her eyes are directed, yet I don't need any longer to show interest in the empty vestibule. Now I look at her and admire, with platonic frankness, the face turned to my side and her shoulders beneath the cloth of her cloak. That's all I can do; I will not let her down with too daring jokes or suggestions, like, "You're cute, I'm cool, be my third wife..." But—ah!—she's so nice, I swear! Even at this distanced semi-discernibility...

The clattering of wheels fades into the muffled background substituted with the beautiful melody by Tariverdiev from the soundtrack to the series of 17 Moments of Springtime. It's when the secret agent Isayev, aka Stirlitz, has a meeting with his wife, arranged by the Center at a small café in Germany.

She gets seated three tables away from him so that he might admire her after a decade of separation. How's she getting on in the already unknown to him USSR? For ten dangerous years, he's been away from his country, away from her...

But sweeping away all the thoughts unnecessary for the moment, he only looks observing stealthily the new features in the half-unfamiliar woman. More! Please, more!.

But no, the time is up. Another Soviet secret agent, her escort sitting by her side, looks at his watch. The undercover meeting's over. And he takes her away so that the bloodhounds of the Gestapo wouldn't run them down…

Yet here, in the local train car, Tariverdiev's melody does not abate, we are out of their control, alone in the whole secluded...

BRENNGG! ZPRTYCH !!

From among the leatherette backrests between us, like from a slightly sloped deck of cards, a red joker jumps out. We were not alone!. That drunk has been sleeping between us all along!

Swollen with the hangover, his red mug semaphores: "The remote flirtation is over!"

Oh, gods! I did roll in the aisles in a fit of horse-laughter! With all the stops pulled out.

Thru his cloudy ignorance, watched the drunk my convulsions, then he looked back at the girl, slap-wiped his mouth with his paw and stiffly shoved off to the vestibule, and then to the next car. His delicate nature revolted against traveling in the same car with screaming quadrupeds.

And you are so right, alky! To each his own. It's time to knock off the mopish shit…

~ ~ ~

The burial of Brezhnev was performed in an outrageously ugly way. Two mujiks with black mourning armbands simply dumped the box into the hole by the Kremlin wall. Those, who watched the ceremony in the live broadcast, before they cut it for the news program "Time", were simply shocked.

The death of Lyonya, smack-smacking each word when he read speeches written for him, wallowing in tawdry orders and medals of the Soviet state awarded to him every year (except for Honored Mother Medal which decorated only women who bore 10 kids), bestowing triple, loud, wet, smooches on whoever leader of fraternal parties or progressive movements in the wide world he only could put his hands on, became a trial for the Soviet population. For almost 20 years, people got used to life if poor and full of shortages, but without non-stop mass repressions of Stalin's times, without running the hunger riots over by tanks and shooting troopers as under Khrushchev...

Leaving the bathhouse on a late Thursday evening, I witnessed how confused got people, amassing into freaked out flocks and looking around for a shepherd. It was the key to documentaries, where big men in officers' shoulder straps burst to pieces in weeping fits about the death of Stalin... Meanwhile, at 13 Decemberists, as if for fun yet evidently lined with fear, they constructed the Great Paper Wall so as to ward off the upcoming unknown. The material used in fortification was all kinds of scrolls of honor awarded to the family members throughout its existence. They became pin-up blocks, side by side, in the gapless row along the wood slat which kept in place the oilcloth substituting for tile paneling in the kitchen wall... I would never imagine there was such a hell of a lot of those certificates. Starting from the sideboard at the window, their close rank stretched up to the washstand by the door to the veranda. The scrolls of honor received for excellent studying in the third grade, for the second place in the pioneer camp checkers tournament, for taking part in amateur performances were serving now a breastwork against the future. I only shrugged. What's the difference?.

After Brezhnev, there followed the leapfrog of mummies, who came to power for 3 or 4 months, and then the population had again to switch off their TV's for 3 days because there was nothing on except for stiff quartets of chamber music and the news program "Time" reading out telegrams of condolence from all kinds of fraternal parties and international leaders. Because that's what mourning is for.

And at last, after another funeral, a certain Gorbachev got to the rudder, quite a middle-aged man, to cut the spree of classical music on TV, although having a suspicious port-wine stain over his bald head. He began to make speeches about acceleration and reconstruction, pronouncing the sound 'g' in the Ukrainian 'gh' way. Well, let him talk if so is his pleasure, who cares? However, one year before the moment we are now at in this my letter to you, he issued a decree with a long title which, in short, introduced the Prohibition, handled "the dry law" for the clarity's sake. That act showed immediately that the talkative leader had never in his life read works by John Mill, where it stands in black on white, that only those governments resort to the like measures who consider their own people as a band of juvenile sillies. Kinda pushing the latch to lock the veranda door and announce, "You're not going anywhere today."

It was more than I could tolerate and, on the day of the Prohibition coming into force, I got off our Seagull bus by the big grocery store in At-Seven-Winds. There I bought a bottle of wine and drank it from the bottle's neck, without caring to get out to the street. That's how I expressed my indignation with "the dry law". Some of the saleswomen began to squeak that I should be grabbed and the militia called, but in the queue filling the store there happened no supporters for that law-abiding project. I took the emptied bottle out and gently dropped it into the trash bin on the sidewalk.

With streetcar changes, I reached the terminal in the Settlement, although it was not an easy task. After *Vsesvit* at the midday break and no snack in the grocery store, the wine did not behave well in the stomach. I hardly managed to keep it under control on the way to 13 Decemberists, where it was finally thrown up into the spill pail in the veranda.

My mother, appearing from the kitchen, screamed in fright, "Kolya! He's throwing up with blood!"

My father also went out to the veranda, but getting the whiff of a familiar scent, waved her fears off, "What blood? Don't you see? Zonked like the last scumbag."

I covered the pail with its lid, changed from my shoes into the slippers, and silently passed by to crash onto the folding coach-bed without ever speaking back to point out that in a series of scumbags there is not much difference, if any, between the last and previous ones…

Before the Prohibition, I was a very moderate drinker. My weekly dose of alcohol was the 2 bottles of beer after the visit to the bathhouse, but Gorbachev with his "dry law" literally brought me to that excess. Sure enough, the weeks were not absolute replicas of one another. There happened more liberal weeks when the bricklayers of our team shared to me wine brought to the trailer. But they did not bring it each week, and sharing also was not the dogma. And all that because of the principle, with which I returned from the business trip to Kiev, where I had a discussion with one young superintendent.

We considered the case of a workman lying, purely theoretically, on the ground next to an unfinished, say, trench. The young theoretician claimed that the jack was just bombed, excluding any other possible hypothesis. My counter-argument was based on the fact that the man had his *spetzovka* on and, consequently, he had just fainted because people do not drink at their workplace, in this case the aforesaid trench. Of course, I knew perfectly well that they drink anywhere and with anything on and kicking against the obvious was a lousy weak standpoint, however, on that particular occasion, I felt like embracing an idealistic stance, on the grounds of an unclear reason...

On my return to Konotop after the business trip, when I was offered a drink in the trailer, I still stuck to the role of a fighter for ideal, declaring that I did not drink at work, although I wanted it. There followed a reasonable argument, that the trailer was not the workplace. I had to make corrections to the principle's formula which ended up as "I do not drink when in my work garb".

So, they offered, in the form of a compromise, to change into clean clothes, have a swig and then change back. With time, the procedure was reduced. I simply got undressed and, in my underpants and tank-top, fuddled, just to be polite, and put my *spetzovka* back on.

In our team, the principles were treated with respect, and I was tolerated in even such a negligee. Only the crane operator Vitalya used to explore and lose his temper, "Why share to him? He'll sell us!"

"No, he's not a snitch."

"When the superintendent drops in and sees his underwear, can't he get it what we are up to?"

But a crane operator was not a member of our team, and Vitalya wasn't even a Konotoper. He came to work from Bakhmuch, and just had that sort of frantic temperament. Once at the midday break, he started to make fun, "Got stuck again into that *Vsesvit* of yours? Come on, have a drink! But don't undress, I also have my principles."

He giggled, gaily flashed his eyes, grabbing the bottle with his hand missing a finger, and poured only for himself and Kyrpa…

One good turn deserves another. For the next midday break, I bought a bottle of "Golden Autumn" and a bar of chocolate from the grocery store because Vitalya and Kyrpa were playing cards in the trailer.

I slowly stripped myself to the underwear and started sharing to the colleagues an exalted example of the sybaritic attitude to life by taking desultory sips from the bottle for 1 ruble 28 kopecks and nibbling at the bar of expensive chocolate.

> (...it was not revenging at all, but an act of purely remedial education...)

Vitalya kept himself in check for quite a long but, eventually, his temperament took over, "Fuck! Snacking the mutter-mumbler swill with "Alenka"! What a pervert!"

But that, of course, was out of envy, in all his life he never tried it that way. And I calmly drank the whole bottle and did not share it even to Kyrpa, who was backing Vitalya's giggles the day before.

> (...however, at times, there still creep some doubts in if that indeed was unalloyed pedagogy or, after all, a sort of vengeful exhibitionism?..)

However, occasions of such kind were merely exceptions, rare and far apart, until the Prohibition shattered my indifference to alcoholic matters...

~ ~ ~

On Thursday, I stayed in the steam room a little longer and left the bathhouse at something past seven. Before Gorbachev's coming to power, I would not even notice it—the blissful don't follow the flow of time—however, the Prohibition brought about rigid temporal limitations for the sale of alcohol. But my after-bath quota?!.

In the beer bar on the opposite side of Square of Konotop Divisions, instead of the usual bright radiance of its fluorescent lamps, a measly yellow spot of a single bulb left on inside. In deject despondence, I was passing by when the bar door opened and two men climbed down the tall porch way of the facility. Well, well, well!. The situation called for closer inspection...

The unlocked door yielded willingly to the light pressure. And indeed, just one 100-watt bulb was lit inside, above the beer tap. Yet, the beer was still flowing from the tap into glasses! Men were grabbing them and retreating to hang on about the tall round tables. If not for the scanty illumination, all was like in good ol' dry-lawless times!

Not everything though. The noise and din of warm friendly conversations were missing. The barman in a white smock kept warning, over and over again, from behind the counter, "Keep quiet, mujiks! And be quick, we're being breaching it."

There's no buzz in booze under the whip-clicks of a stopwatch… Here, in the murky half-dark dungeon room, where you couldn't make out the face of a man standing at the table opposite, we were like the last handful of Knights Templar after their order was crushed and pronounced anathema. Here, we hid ourselves away from the alcohol-free spies and informers. Any low-grade trader could point at you and yell, "Lay hands on him! Hold fast! Call the militia!" We were outlaws…

Honestly, I do not really like beer bars. You stand in the line and watch how tipsy scumbags approach the mujiks queuing ahead of you, "Bro, and a couple for me, eh?" And instead of one line, you have to stand, in fact, thru 2 or 3. Even more disgusting, when already quite close to the tap, you feel a jab in your ribs and a guy who you, like, have seen someplace, giggles and winks at you, "Don't forget? I asked three mugs." No, next time I'd rather go to a café where they sell only bottled, more expensive, beer but without those impudent tail-clingers... And on the following bath-day Thursday, I haughtily passed by the beer bar and stomped to the café.

"We've got no beer."

Damn! Okay, I can go to Peace Square... But in the café next to the cinema there also was no beer. The railway station restaurant remained my last chance. Same story. But it's Thursday!

That way I was made buy a bottle of white wine. The tables in the restaurant were big, for about ten persons each, surrounded by heavy chairs in leather upholstery, yet almost empty of guests. I took a seat somewhere in the middle of the hall and started to pour wine into a glass as I would do it from a bottle of beer – in a knitting-needle-thin trickle. So was my habit.

After the first glass, I was approached by some mujik of an ambiguous occupation who asked for a permission to get seated by. The whole hall of vacant tables, and he liked this particular one. Well, I did not mind.

Landing into the next chair, he shared that he was in transit from the city of Lvov. I answered that Lvov also was a good city, welcome in passing, and all that. And I started to fill the following glass. Embracing by his intent stare the filigree-thin trickle, he announced his recent release from Zone... The couple of guys at the next but one table cut their gossip. I congratulated him on being free at last and drank.

His face got suddenly distorted by the expression of indistinct malice, and he went over to loud threats of having intercourse with my rectum when 2 of us would land in the same prison cell.

(...all that, of course, in the most explicit straightforward terms...)

The wine was finished off, the neighbor at the table obviously did not like me, and I got up to leave. One of the guys that were sitting nearby, was already standing in between the tables. "Bang the bitch!" he said to me. "What are you waiting for? We're in!" An absolutely unfamiliar guy, probably, he had a fit of patriotism.

"You did not get it," answered I. "He's not local. The law of hospitality does not allow for crushing the bottle against his pate. When on a vacation I'll visit the city of Lvov and check what problem makes the travelers from there so impolite."

I do not know if the guy understood my lengthy speech. Anyway, he returned to his table, and I went out, leaving my neighbor in front of the empty bottle by the empty glass on the empty varnish of the tabletop. He had resorted to the ultimate invocation, yet the magic did not work and the bottle did not turn into a scatter of fragments by a wallop against his Ascabar trained pate. But still and all, I cannot forgive it Gorbachev... You may ask what had Gorbachev to do with fucking my asshole? Even in the era of deficit and severe shortages, the bottled beer did not disappear from Konotop. Never...

But he went loose beyond all bounds of decency and judgment and kept amending the Prohibition with new articles to toughen the struggle against alcoholism… In the evening of the day with the fresh, stricter, measures coming into force, I went as usual to the Central Park of Recreation. However, I reached neither the dance-floor nor even the ticket office.

In the central alley of the park, I was intercepted by a muscular stranger with a dark hair and horseshoe-shaped mustache in the style of VIA The Pesnyary. He told that I did not know him, but he knew me because he was from KhAZ, where he worked with my brother... I recollected as one time my brother Sasha admiringly mentioned some former border guard fond of demonstrating miracles of acrobatics at their workplace. Probably, that was him.

The stranger carefully held a white cellophane packet in his right hand, and he did not slap the nasty night mosquitoes but instead blew them by sharp puffs off his biceps bulging out the T-shirt sleeves. Just like me, another adept of non-resistance, or else that way he was trained for

frontier patrols – make sure to avoid producing unnecessary sound waves betraying your location.

Giving a slight shake to the white cellophane—to which it responded with a luring clandestine tinkle—he informed it was wine in there because he wisely procured it before the curfew. Would I keep him company? The answer was in the affirmative.

It looked strange to me though, when he turned to the flocks of youngsters streaming to the dance-floor with the repetitive request for a knife to open a bottle. Everyone shook their heads and some even recoiled, scared by the incongruity of the question with the general spirit of concurrent times... But then, maybe, it was his personal form of protest against the Prohibition…

A knife was never found, yet he somehow contrived to tear the plastic cork off by application it against a beam in the bench by which we stood in the alley. He handed the bottle to me. I said it would be better for him to start it because of a certain flaw in my brake system.

"Never mind. I've got another in the bag," insisted he.

Well, I had warned anyway, ain't it? And I killed the 750 ml without a trace.

"Hmm, yes," observed the companion thoughtfully. "I did not get it properly." He uncorked the second bottle, yet refrained passing it to me, just held in his hands, and when we sank onto the bench, he put it between us.

We began to probe each other as to which of manifold philosophical subjects might flag off a friendly conversation. As a rule, after the second glass, you start to give out awesomely smart things, getting astonished yourself by their unexpected wisdom. In the end, of course, everything will slide into the eternal, slippy gash as predicted by the truck crane operator, Ivan Kot, but why not to glitter the sequin of your well-trained mind for a starter?

Alas, the envious malevolent stars forestalled any shining, or sparkling, or glittering... Along the alley, slowly and almost inaudibly, rolled up a van with inscription "militia" on the door. It stopped and 2 gentlemen in cockades jumped out of the cab.

My interlocutor, not waiting for the further development in the upcoming scene, without delay threw himself over the bench and started down the side alley towards the dark building of the city council. I didn't even think to compete him in this track and field event and, with a bottleful freshly tanked into the hold, I could only admire how quickly he was leaving. Moreover, those 2 bulls were already towering above me.

None of them followed him either, only the older officer tapped his shoe heels against the asphalt in a pretty fast step dance, staying in the same spot though. The performance was accompanied with a strange, possibly, also Irish, air, "Oolyou-lyou!". The border guard accelerated sharply and dissolved in the darkness.

The militiaman dancer picked the open, but still not started, bottle up from the bench. He turned it upside down in his outstretched hand and held so in both sadistic and mournful attitude, while the wine gurgled out to the ground.

"Come on," the second man said to me, nodding at the already open side door in the van... I stuck my head inside. In the dim light of a tiny bulb in the ceiling, those invited before me sat along the blind sidewalls. An elderly militia petty officer sat leaning his back against the partition from the cab, facing the public.

Admiring the impeccable finesse of my own movements, I ascended the interior. The door slammed shut behind me. "Good evening!" amiably and indiscriminately greeted I all the present, and at once got a kick in my ass.

"The prick even 'good-evening' knows!" yelled the petty officer who hit me.

Falling on someone from the previous catch, I automatically exclaimed, "I beg your pardon!" and immediately looked back fearful of another kick. It seemed, I was not going to get it for the "pardon", the officer was too lazy to get up.

The ride was not long. Leaving the vehicle, I recognized the courtyard where The Orpheuses were brought for giving the testimony on the disappearance of the accordion made in DDR, but now I was taken to another building. At the desk in the corridor, there sat a militia Captain. After a couple of questions addressed to my fellow-travelers, they were sent to the cell.

Then he turned to me. Observing that I answered his questions adequately and did not try to push for my rights nor refuted the report of the officers who delivered me, he asked where I worked. Then he called somewhere to verify and after a very short talk as well as checking my proficiency at bending exercises, he finally ordered me to go home. "Straight home! Got it? Nowhere else!"

I went out of the gate. Why do they all push me around? Fuck them! And I obstinately returned to the park and bought a ticket to the dance-floor.

To celebrate the new stage in the on-going anti-alcoholic campaign, the gate was guarded by a militia sergeant and 2 public order enforcers adorned with festively red armbands.

"Did you drink today?" demanded one of them.

"Never!" responded I and proceeded to my bench under the fence to sit there until the end of dancing. Which happened after a couple of numbers…

The letter of advice on my detention reached SMP-615 a month or 2 later. I already forgot about it when the new boss called me from the construction site and demanded to write an explanatory. He obviously made his mind to use the situation to full advantage, and in a week the trade-union committee met to consider my personal case.

With the autumnal chillness setting in, I attended the meeting in my raincoat and hat on.

The new boss, in his jacket and tie, began to expound my transgressions. The freshest of them, attested by the paper from the militia, was my violating directives of the Party and Government on a park bench. That's how I disgraced SMP-615 in the eyes of the public and the authorities! How long to tolerate?!

However, I chose the position of an observer and to all rhetorical questions answered with a shrug of my left shoulder under the raincoat...

And my contemptuous attitude to the management?! Here, if you please – an explanatory written in verse! From the stack of papers on the desk in front of him, the new boss picked up one sheet and shook it in the air.

...wow! I did not know there was accumulated such a dossier on me…

And look at another sample here! The reminder written by me to the trade-union committee (he read it up), "3 months ago I applied for upgrading my bricklayer category. However, till now the qualification commission of SMP-615 neither raise an eyebrow nor move their horns."

The trade-union committee burst in laughter, the new boss, obedient to the herd instinct, also grunted not understanding though what funny was about it...

Besides, it's simply dangerous to be next to me because I was putting an arm under the slab!.

And that's a fact. On that day there were 4 of us: the overseer Karenin, the carpenter Ivan, the crane operator Vitalya and I. The sun was glaring upon the March snow around the construction site where we were starting a new apartment building. The foundation blocks had been laid in the pit since autumn, and then, throughout the winter, Ivan's job was to look after them. From 8 to 5. He was coming to turn on the heater in the trailer, and watched the silent white snowdrifts outside the window, or considered the cut-outs of cute beauties from girlie magazines that he glued on all the walls to give his hands at least some job... On that March day, he became my hand.

The task was simple – to lay 4 courses of bricks in the short wall of the future staircase-entrance so as to install a stump of a slab over the future doorway to the basement. Standing on the trestle between the foundation blocks, I raised 2 short corners and started laying courses under the *shnoorka* to finish the stump's prop of a wall. It was a half-hour task, no more, while the working day ended in an hour plus. However, Vitalya, the crane operator, was impatient to climb down from his perch in the cab of the tower crane and play cards with Ivan till 5. So he shouted from above to the carpenter to hook the concrete slab stump intended for the installation. The stump's one side would rest onto the blocks of the traverse wall, the other side would be supported by the readied corners of the unfinished wall. They'll lap it up! And the remaining gap between the bearing corners would be filled sometime after, in the process of construction.

I tried to bring it home to Ivan, that now it was the most convenient moment for finishing the started wall. Later, to fill the gap left under the stump, the bricklayers would not have the trestle under their feet. Let him better bring the mortar and I'd finish it in 15 minutes, working under such favorable conditions. Yet, Vitalya for Ivan was a closer pal than logic, so he went and hooked the stump as told.

The crane operator raised the load, turned the boom and rolled the tower crane along the railway, carrying the stump to me for insertion as he planned. He yelled from his cab to quickly spread mortar on the corners of the unfinished wall otherwise he would drop it just as is, on dry bricks – they'll lap it up! Instead of mortar, I put my arm on a brick corner so that he did not fulfill his intention.

Vitalya poured hectic curses from his birdhouse in the height, rang the crane bell without interruption, and kept closing in on the arm, with the load. In general, it was a frontal attack of two fighter planes against each other: he who yields was nothing but a snotty chicken.

When the concrete stump neared the arm to about a meter, overseer Karenin awoke from watching the breath-taking battle of two aces and yelled to Vitalya to take the load aside. And there it hung while I finished the wall the way it was right. Overseer Karenin stood on the blocks above my head and asked, "Why did you do it, Sehrguey? He's crazy enough to crush your arm. You'd be a cripple."

"Karenin, my whole life is crushed. All that remains is just my work. I don't want them make a snot of it."

"Where?" asked Ivan standing on the other wall of blocks behind my head. "What's the talk about crushin'?"

"He means it was his written fate from birth," overseer Karenin explained to him.

I was finishing the last course of bricks, like, busy, but I could not let the erudite conversation go without me, "May his hand wither, to that writer!"

Karenin and Ivan instantly got silent, the overseer somehow shrank and turned his eyes aside. And exactly that very moment, squinting my eyes at the rays of the sun descending to the horizon, while spreading mortar for insertion of the slab stump onto the finished wall, I for the first time thought that the particulars of our lives were defined and occurring the way as we recount them in our later life. And it doesn't matter to whom and whether in gossip or writing...

> (...it's scary! As it turns out, by that spontaneous curse I wished my own hand to wither away?!. Why? It is so unfair!
>
> ..shut up!. who are you to make complaints of unjust treatment?. how else could I show that cheeky puppeteer in his made-in-Germany sleeping bag that I’m not a servile marionette neither a tool to go by his drowsily scintillating blabber meant for reconstructing the past beyond his reach?.

I’m not sure if you can get it though, good news is that at least I can follow myself... however, I’d better shut up now for not to overstrain our brain.

...moreover, if not for this sleeping bag my story might very easily and more than once have ended in the nameless river at the Object...)

Ivan and I inserted the stump. Vitalya got down from the tower crane and still had time for playing cards with Ivan before we went to the road to meet and board on our Seagull. I soon forgot the whole incident, however, the new boss did not omit to add it to the dossier…

"And you all know as well as I do, how often they nab him to the psychiatric hospital... Yet, worse than anything else, he is a chronic violator of labor discipline. 3 occurrences of absenteeism in only one year! That's why I propose to fire him for systematic absenteeism."

That's right – 2 days to Moscow after the train model for Andrey, and 1 day to the publishing house Dnipro in Kiev... At the time of mentioned violations, I fully realized that it was an act of absenteeism. However, it was normal for a workman at SMP-615 to have a week of absenteeism, and a couple of champions had accrued up to 20 days, which fact I considered a guarantee of permissibility to skip 3 days, the grosser violators would serve a cover for my ass. Yet, no go! The integrity of the labor discipline couldn't be bribed by a smartie's calculations!

And now, after 5 consequential records in my workbook marking the gratitude for and appreciation of my labor achievements, on October 18, 1985, the head of personnel department of SMP-615, A. Petukhov, with that same beautiful handwriting wrote that I was fired on the strength of Article 40, for absenteeism without satisfactory excuse. The participants in the meeting of the trade-union committee unanimously raised their hands in favor of the measure proposed by the new boss. Afterward, some of them commented that such a result was exclusively my blunder, I should have stood up, and, hat in hand, humbly ask for mercy and then they would forgive me…

Why did I maintain the role of a monitor to the end and did not make a speech in self-defense, pointing out the absenteeism of others, quite a few, and did not express my bitter regret for my wrong-doings? I simply was fed up. The time had come to seek other grounds for the application of my experimentalism. Not because of so was my plan though. As always, I remained just a tool, an operation-end man executing his orders. The time and Experimentalism were the decision-making bodies...

Besides, another 100-apartment block was finished in summer. A bricklayer from our team, named Nina, a fat woman with a hairy birthmark on her cheek, got an apartment in it. She entered SMP-615 a couple of months before the commissioning of the apartment block and, having received the apartment, quit the organization.

I went to the personnel department and asked Petukhov about my progress in the queue for improving my housing conditions. He answered I was number 35 in it.

That's ridiculous! 6 years before, I was 24th in the line!

He replied with calligraphic roundness: since those times 3 bosses replaced each other, and he, personally, was not around when I got a job at SMP-615, so now my place in the list was thirty-fifth and no other data to refer to…

Fare thee well, my beloved construction train! Farewell, our team! I won't set on fire our trailer, even though my guitar, brought for celebrating Grynya's birthday, the next morning was not there…

~ ~ ~

When the last entry in the workbook ran "on strength of Article", you became a sort of blacklisted – no organization had any job for you. However, in Konotop there was an enterprise not overly afraid of outcasts, "Rags" was the name of the brave company, aka recycling factory.

On the strength of my basic specialty, they gave me the job of a workman at the overhaul unit. All of the overhaul consisted of 3 workmen, but we did not do any major repair, neither any repair at all for that matter. We sat in the room, idling the time and occasionally went out into the yard of the factory full of stacks of modern recycling equipment brought there a year or, maybe, 2 before and protected from the weather vagaries by a giant all-embracing cover of black roofing felt, because the building for the equipment had not been finished yet. The factory itself huddled in a pair of barrack-like structures, offspring from the era of the first five-year plans, plus a couple of huge arched Quonset Huts made of corrugated white tin, and several various huts and sheds leaning against the wall around the factory grounds.

But at the very beginning of my overhaul career, I was not bored with all that bleakness because they sent me on a business trip to the city of Kiev... The then Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Comrade Shcherbitsky, was going to visit the Kiev Recycling Factory to share his valuable instructions on the development of so important a branch in the national economy. As a result, the recycling factories from all over the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine started sending their workmen to Kiev to spit and polish the metropolitan recycling enterprise in preparation for the high-ranking visit.

When I arrived to make my contribution, the metal structures in the shop floors of the factory had been paint-coated for the fourth time already, and the factory yard freshly covered with the third layer of asphalt… They were the farewell days of golden autumn, the sun smiled affectionately from the calm sky, but the sight of the small Fir trees in stone pots, like, to decorate the courtyard called for the blues to set in. The insufficient capacity of the pots would not allow for the trees to grow, they were condemned to perish unavoidably after the pompous visit...

Before leaving for the business trip, I went to the Konotop Department Store to buy a sports-bag for keeping personal necessities. As it turned out, there was a fit of shortage for such bags and I had to buy a smaller, though practical, one instead. However, if you observed closely enough, it was, like, a female goods item. Might I've been a pervert after all?.

For the stay in Kiev, I was billeted at a boarding house near the "Pipe", on the very bank of the Dnieper river. Before the war, there was a plan to cross the Dnieper at that place by a metro line. They even managed to build a stop of reinforced concrete, which looked like a giant pipe indeed, with the diameter as tall as a two-story house. Later, the circumstances and plans got changed and the "Pipe" was covered with all sorts of "here were Osya and Kisa" and the like historical stamps.

The boarding house was a long one-story timber structure with pencil-box rooms, like in the hostels, only the windows were wider. In the mornings I went out on the sandy bank of the mighty stream to do exercises among the bushes. To watch the Dnieper from so a-near was not like taking looks from a local train flying over it along the bridge. The oceanic mass of water rolling before your eyes was simply stunning.

...and so without a stop day after day... one-two... millennium upon millennium... three-four... bend left... bend right…

In the room, besides me, there lived a blond fella from Southern Ukraine with a graphical story of how he was stabbed on the beach. The homie bros from the same neighborhood jabbed a knife in his stomach and he fell on his back. And then the precinct approached. The guys pretended playing cards, and they just threw an open newspaper over the knife handle sticking up from his stomach. The militiaman started asking about something, and the blond lay and looked, and couldn't squeeze a word out, and flies were landing and racing over the newspaper.

The guys, naturally, "Nah, we know nothing." When the precinct left they called the ambulance because he had not knocked on them…

There was almost no renovation work left to be done at the factory, and the business trippers were just sitting in the Red Corner room, where the young and bearded artist, a local hombre, wrote out the letters of one and the same slogan, day after day, on one and the same long strip of red fabric spread over along a very long table, or gossiping with his friends, also Kievers, who knew ways of getting in for a visit thru the guarded check-entrance.

We changed clothes right there, into fresh *spetzovka*s given out by the factory, and hung our rigs onto the chair backs. The shower was working around the clock, round the corner down the corridor – some halcyon days in full swing. My fellow-business-trippers were amazed at my talent of sitting in the same position and never strolling about the Red Corner, nor partaking in the mutual idle gossip but only listening and watching in a modest, still, and silent way…

After another of working days, I returned to the boarding house and got it that the blond was thru his business trip and went home because only my bed remained in the room, and my perverted bag was unzipped and gaping wide, with my last 10 rubles missing from it. And there still remained 1 week to survive on my business trip.

Next morning, it was Saturday, I went out in search of food. I did not make any definite plans, but simply walked towards the distant bridge across the Dnieper. Then I walked along that bridge almost free of traffic even though supported by a looking solidly multitude of steel cables from

pylons. On the opposite riverbank, in the field to the right, towered several apartment blocks – the embryo of Troyeshchina neighborhood, but I passed by and on, towards the faraway forest.

The road ran thru the village of Poghrebby and entered the forest where I started looking for mushrooms. I came across of just 2 species, both unfamiliar. Their gills looked alike, but those with pointed caps tasted too bitter, so I had to eat the other sort, with concave caps. The hunger slackened and I went back.

In the field between the village and the distant tower blocks, I hit the mother lode. There was a scattering of potatoes on the roadside. Probably, the truck was loaded with potatoes piling above the sides and, on the way, the surplus poured over when the truck dodged an oncoming vehicle. I stuffed my pockets with potatoes, and on Sunday came to the same spot with the obviously female bag. In the boarding house, at the very end of the corridor, there was a kitchen with a gas stove and a large common pan. Without peeling the potatoes, I boiled a quantity of them for a few days of consumption.

But before it, while I was coming back to Kiev over the bridge hanging from its steel cables, I understood what namely prevented me from living a normal life, it was because of my poetry. Everyone else was living like all the other people, because they did not write poetry, and if I gave it up, then everything would, probably, get to rights…

It's easy to say "it's time to give up", but how? To burn the pocket notebook which the blond generously left in my bag? An overly trivial tack. So I decided to make a collection of poems and put the final full-stop to all that. Such was the plan.

On Monday, I visited the ante-room of the personnel department at the factory and asked the secretary-typist for 32 blank sheets of paper. Exactly the volume of *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Karl Marx, but just as many pages were needed for all the poems plus the preface. Apart from that, she gave me two uncut sheets, which she couldn't use because of that defect. Yet, the defective double sheet turned easily into a perfect folder for the rest. Returning to the Red Corner room, I asked the artist to make from that folder a cover for the collection of poems titled "Just so?" In the evening at the boarding house, I copied the preface and the poems to the sheets of the donated paper with almost a typeset handwriting.

Next morning at the factory, the artist showed the cover he created – the name of the author and the title against a background of abstractionism-styled beige waves. Then he scratched the back of his head and confessed, that starting the creation he was somewhat tired and emotional, for which reason the author's name, as well as the collection title, were drawn on the back, instead of the front, cover... Abnormal double sheets were not an everyday find, so I had no other option but to paginate the collection in Arabic style – from the back cover to the front…

It's very convenient to live in the same city with a publishing house, after finishing your work at five, you've got plenty of time to visit them without any absenteeism... The office where some time ago a young man directed me to the specialist on Maugham was already shared by a couple of workers – some young man and an additional young woman. I asked where they were handing poetry in. They were delighted to send me to the first office room round the left corner in the

corridor. In that office, on gently breaking the news of delivery a collection of poetry, I heard the familiar response, "Who sent you?"

"Ah! Yes, of course! I was sent from the neighboring office, just round the corner. D'you know them?" That served a sufficient recommendation for the collection to change hands.

I left the publishing house both grieving and laughing.

Grieving? I rejected my own offspring, made them a bunch of doorbell babies, pledging to keep sterile infertility from that moment on, forever and ever.

Laughing? I was free!

> (...starting a poem you are doomed to merciless bondage. You strain yourself and plow like a slave until the moment you can step aside and say, "Well, yes, it's, like, rather-more-or-less, sort of, so enough, I can't do better anyway..." ...)

Even louder I laughed at the poetry receiver because there was no return address with the collection, only the fictitious name of the author – Klim Solokha. Stuff it in your pipe and have a smoke, *salaga*!

"...service done!."

"What was their reaction?" asked the artist-designer.

"A standing ovation."

The supply of foraged potatoes could see me thru the whole week, however, potatoes alone somehow did not satiate, even if sprinkled with the salt found in the common kitchen... The artist noticed when in the Red Corner room I lifted a dried bread roll, forgotten by someone on a windowsill, and ate it, hiding in my fist. He reported the incident to the head of the personnel department.

The grumpy geezer, in the unvarying mask of disdain on the face, came to Red Corner, already empty of the business trippers of whom I was the last one, and demanded explanations for so strange an action.

The money was lost from my bag.

Stolen? Who?

I knew nothing. There had been 10 rubles which were there no more.

The mask twitched in disgust and he walked out. Soon, I was summoned to his office where he informed me that my business trip papers would be stamped for the entire stretch (there still remained 3 more days) but I had to perform an urgent work: a KAMAZ truck had dumped its load of sand at a wrong place in the yard, so the sand had to be moved, yet not by a bulldozer whose caterpillars would mangle the fresh asphalt.

It took me 2 or 3 hours to shovel the sand behind the kinda screen of too small pots with the doomed Fir-tree babies. I was paid 10 rubles for the job, which money I immediately received from the cashier in the accountancy office. The local train ticket to Konotop was 4 rubles plus. So I went to a grocery store, bought a bottle of vodka, transparent as a tear of separation, something there for a snack, and returned to the Red Corner room. Together with the artist, we drank that vodka for the success of the poetry collection whose pages had to be turned backward…

~ ~ ~

The overhaul at the Konotop recycle factory was headed by Yura, one of the 3 workmen at the unit. He loved to laugh and did it ably, exposing the fixture of white metal on his fang. In the white-and-black films they usually portrayed Komsomol leaders looking like him and only the fix did not fit the image.

The second overhauler was Arsen, cross-eyed, but not too much so. He put on the airs of a dignified aqsaqal, despite his young age. The reason for his tremendous pride was having the son who reached the age of 2 years already.

I hit it off with Arsen, but Yura with his stalking horse of laughter kept trying hard to crush me, most likely, because of his aversion to my higher education. I did not tell anyone about the fact, but those 4 years were recorded in my workbook now kept in the personnel department of the factory, and Yura spent lots of time in the administration barrack, readily laughing along with everyone there. The main impediment to establishing friendly relations between us 2 were my quotations as well as sharing news from *Morning Star*. Arsen, for his part, tried his best to pacify our feud.

Once talking to Arsen, I cited certain lines from the work of Karl Marx *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

> (...well, yes, Frederick Engels is commonly considered the author of that work, however, Fritz published it after his dear friend Karl passed away already, giving his buddy opportunity to rummage thru his archives and works in progress not seen yet thru the press. Probably, Engels, like the blond from Southern Ukraine found expropriation of the absent justifiable by inconveniences suffered previously.
>
> Anyway, he openhandedly supported Karl, his wife, and their 6 kids with the money of his father, also Fritz...)

I did not draw Arsen's attention to all those details, keeping down to a short quotation from the work itself. Yura, who happened about, suddenly snapped in demanding that I never ever dare start provocative talks like this in his presence because he was a communist and knew where to give a phone call on statements of that sort.

For the first time in our clashes, the last word remained by him. He dumbfounded me with his threat to halloo the KGB at the founders of Marxism-Leninism. And that's no fun, they would easily run them down, for all I know...

Another time, I was depicting to Arsen the Wagner's ballet about Scottish witches which I attended during the business trip to Kiev. Dancing a solo dance, one of the hexes stumbled and with a wooden knock fell flat onto the stage floor.

"Ha-ha-ha!" cheerfully reacted Yura on his visit to the overhaul room from the administration barrack.

"And imagine, Arsen, in the whole hall there was not a single jerk to laugh at her. She got up and danced on, showed her high mettle, you know."

And Yura also showed that it was not in vain that he spent so much time by the administration. As a result, I was transferred to the factory's production section, to embrace the position of a presser…

What, actually, was Rags? It served a place where freight cars were bringing rubbish sorted at garbage dumps. Discarded dreck clothing for the most part, as well as waste paper.

Women from the nearby village of Popovka dissected the tatters with the howling disks of their machine tools and sorted the rugs again into soft mounds on the cemented floor in the aisle between their workplaces – cotton tatters, knitted rags, artificial fur collars from winter coats, etc.

Day after day they stood in front of their machine tools in dusty *spetzovka* wear with dangling clusters of safety pins on their chest, which they detected and pulled out from fabrics so that the steely trifles did not damage the disk. Such grapes of pins made them evil-eye-proof forever...

Time and again, 2 loaders approached those rag mounds with a deep box on long poles, like a sedan chair. Their faces were wrapped with bandannas, in the style of bank robbers, so as not to inhale the dense clouds of dust hanging around the machine tools. They piled rags high into their box and carried to the neighboring pressing section, pacing in a precipitated half-trot. That jogging gait was dictated by the weight of the load.

> (...once or twice I replaced someone of the missing loaders but was not able to do more than a couple of goes.

"Sehryoga! You must be relaxed when carrying. Relax!"

Yet even after that instruction, I could not reach relaxation with the long pole-handles slipping slowly, unlocking by their unsustainable weight my fingers strained in a vain grip...)

The press was also a box but it had a door and no poles because it stood on the floor, anchored to its place. With the door open, you needed, first of all, to put over the box bottom 2 thin and narrow metal strips, aka *shinka*, leaving their ends out of the box. Then you had to line the box from inside with a couple of throwaway burlap sacks and lock the door with a hook outside. After stuffing the box with the trash brought by the loaders, you hit one of the 3 buttons on the press side. The electric motor, fixed atop the press shield over the box, started to creak and howl, and crept down the shaft, pushing the shield also down. It pressed the trash towards the bottom as deep as it could. When the pitch of the motor howling rose to whine, it meant the motor had done all it could and didn't have power to squeeze any firmer. At that point, you hit the "stop" button and then the button "up". The shield with the motor started the reverse creeping, up the shaft. Those ups and downs, the press executed really slowly.

Then you filled the hollow, produced in the box by the shield's cyclic travel, stuffing in additional armfuls of trash because the readied bale should weigh about 60 kg. After the third going down, the shield was stopped to keep all that in place while you tied tightly the ends of *shinka* about the produced, roughly cubic, bale. There remained only to send the shield up and roll the readied bale out of the box. The farther away you rolled it over the floor the better, it wouldn't now be in the way of the upcoming bales.

About the press, there gradually accumulated a flock of bales and then Misha the loader came with a two-wheel barrow. He shoved the bottom shelf of the barrow under the bale and yanked the handles toward himself. The bale lay upon the handles, propped by the shelf from behind, and Misha dragged the barrow to the exit from the pressing section.

Near the exit gate, there stood the booth of Valya the weigher, with a large luggage scales next to it. Misha toppled the bale onto the scales and, having dipped a short stick into a tin can with red paint, wrote on the burlap wrapping of the bale figures of its weight, which Valya yelled to him thru the glass of her booth because Misha was old and half deaf. Then he dumped the bale from the scales, heaved it onto his two-wheel barrow again, and rolled it out of the pressing section into the open air, and there along the path of crippled concrete into the Quonset Hut for the processed product…

When an empty railway freight car came to the dead-end track by the Hut, the team of loaders stacked the bales into the car and it was driven away, no matter where, probably, to some factories for further processing of recyclables...

In the pressing section, there was only 1 window crusted with the dust accumulated there from the period of the First Five-Year Plan. The illumination was served by dim yellowish bulbs, one over each of the 4 presses. True, one of them did not work after donation some of it parts to the remaining 3 manned by 2 operators in the pressing section.

The production norm for a presser was 32 bales per shift. I hardly turned them out during the working day, while the other presser, another Misha, who lived with Valya the bale weigher, would have finished the norm ahead of time and left, whistling haphazard airs. He was more experienced presser and did not put excessive quantities of rags into the press box, while my bales showed abnormal overweight. Misha the loader would shake his deaf head disapprovingly, scribbling with the dipped stick "78" or "83" on the bales of my production. Then he, with a grunt, heaved the bale onto the barrow and dragged it out, because he was a strong old man. He was silent by nature and never reprove me. But I felt guilty all the same because I could not catch the hang of guessing the weight of the rags stuffed into the press box…

Apart from the midday break, there were 2 more half-hour breaks, just for having rest. We spent them in the common large room with lockers alongside 2 of its walls. In the wall opposite the door, there were 2 windows large enough to make the room light because the dust stuck to them was not quite opaque. 4 square tables with white plastic-cover tops were put in a close row under the windows, forming one common table for the midday meal, with long plank benches along its sides. That was the locker room of pressers and loaders who changed their clothes there. However, in the midday break, the Popovka women also came in because at theirs there was not a table to have a meal at.

I did not *havvat* there. For the midday meal, I traveled to the canteen of the "Motordetail" plant... After crossing the railway track, I went over the field and turned away from the city limit into the windbreak belt to follow the trail between the trees and bushes there to the terminal of Streetcar 1, opposite the plant check-entrance. The whole journey took 15 to 20 minutes.

It was a very modern plant, and thru the glass walls of the canteen on the second floor, there opened the view on the field from where I was coming. And there were no problems at the check-entrance, anyone in a *spetzovka* was considered a workman at the plant. The *havvage* portions at the canteen were small but cheap, and for a couple of hours after you did not feel hungry.

Sometimes, the bale weigher Valya ordered to bring her a custard cake from the canteen. On the way back, when crossing the railway track in front of pulled up locomotives in the head of their freight trains waiting for "the green" to pass thru the Konotop junction, I made attempts at bribing the locomotives with the cake wrapped in a piece of paper. They had such good-natured faces with beards in red paint coat, like the image in the sail on the Kon-Tiki raft. But they remained incorruptible.

“Well, as you please, then!" and I was taking the cake to the bale weigher Valya…

And the half-hour breaks, were for gossip and playing dominoes, the ubiquitous "goat". Besides the mujiks, the breaks were also attended by bale weigher Valya, and a couple of younger women from Popovka, and sometimes technologist Valya came in as well. She was an able-bodied woman, sufficient to fill impulsive poetic dreams, but I had already kicked off those things.

There were 4 loaders in the locker room of whom only old Misha kept silent all the time and never chip in, and even "goat" he played very rarely. Loader Volodya Kaverin with a narrow reddish horseshoe mustache trickling down to his chin, on the contrary, was loud and passionate, but loader Sasha sporting a dark toothbrush mustache soberly pacified his partner's fervor. He was tall, calm, reliable and—what a small place the world is!—married to that very Valya from the typist pool who had typed the collection of short stories by Maugham in Ukrainian.

The fourth loader, Vanya, was chubby and he shaved all of his round face. He sometimes threatened to smash my fucking mug for some of my remarks, but I doubted it – you could see from his face that he was a kind block. Besides, he was a real, big-time woman-hater and, holding the dominoes bones in his palm he used to ofttimes declare all of them were bitches.

"I'm on top of her, pumping, digging, doing my level best and she just lays with her eyes into the ceiling, 'Oy, Vanya! there's such cobweb in the corner!', well, ain't they bitches after that?!"

Even a saint wouldn't hold back a passing remark, "Poor boy!" says I, "Such a humiliation leaves no choice but become gay indeed."

And the loader begins fiddling his customary score about breaking my fucking mug. However, odds are very poor he'd ever keep his threat because behind the firmly knitted brows of a hard-core misogynist, it was hard not to see in Vanya's round face his heart of gold and tender nature.

~ ~ ~

End winter, the factory workers traditionally went on a three-day excursion to Moscow. Not all, of course, only those who wanted to. Technologist Valya asked me if I wanted. I had to admit that I hardly had enough money to live until the payday.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said, "the trade-union pay for food and accommodation. You can go there with just 3 rubles."

That was a challenge to Experimentalist. I signed up for the tour and prepared a three-ruble bill…

We arrived in Moscow filled with the winter dark. The small column of the tourists was headed by Yura who led thru the immense railway station to the square, it was not his first year in those tours. I was the file closer keeping my hands in the empty pockets of the demi-saison camel's hair coat. A bus was already waiting for us before the station to take to the Red Square.

Arriving there, the bus stopped, and all the tourists went out to pass by the mummy of Lenin in the Mausoleum. There only remained the bus driver, the guide Olya and I.

"Are not you going?" asked Olya.

"I disgust the dead."

The driver slightly creaked his seat turning back from the steering wheel...

Obviously, to the Red Square arrived more buses with the excursionists from different other places in our vast Motherland, because the driver opened the door and 3 more guide girls climbed up inside. They knew each other and in a brisk shoptalk were discussing the internal affairs of their tour operating organization and anything else...

Their sacred tribute paid, the Konotop excursionists came back from the frosty snow-clad Red Square. Elatedly rubbing and slapping the shoulders of their coats and pea-jackets, they filled the bus with animated whoops and the stomps of treds in their footwear against the entrance steps... We were taken to the Veh-Deh-eN-Kha area, to a hotel built in the late fifties for the participants in the World-Festival of Youth and Students. The guide Olya specified details of further cooperation: on the morning of the third day the bus would take us to the railway station because we were more interested in combing thru all kinds of stores than in "look-to-the-right, look-to-the-left", wasn't it so? Everyone joined in the joyous chorus chant that, yes, it was so…

Our *havvage* was served at the canteen in a separate building and paid for with the stamped paper slips of the coupons distributed among the excursionists... One of the canteen employees recommended me not to leave my camel coat on the hanger by the entrance door to the hall.

"But eating with the coat off is more convenient."

"Look, Vera!" she yelled back to another worker in the canteen kitchen. "There's one more guest from Communism!"

Since I was not interested in shopping of any kind, I mostly walked about the area, had a ride on a trolley bus to its terminal, and even found a newsstand with *Morning Star* on sale. In Konotop, because of the explosive situation in Poland, that newspaper was often missing even from the news stall at the station. Probably, the editors in England were covering Polish events incorrectly.

3 rubles was not a sum to live in a grand style, but I still watched a historical action movie starring Karachentsev.

> (...the ours, in general, can make 15 minutes of a movie quite watchable, but the rest may have been safely skipped...)

To the hotel Polar I went by the grandiose Moscow subway, aka metro. Since it was the daytime, the restaurant guests were some kind of excursionists because they all were sitting side by side in a row along the table assembled from smaller ones, and ate their *havvage* with their fur coats and overcoats on.

I asked a man in the waiter's uniform garb to call waiter Nikolay but he only shrugged his shoulders. Then I demanded the head waiter, a tall woman came out in the same stripe-sleeved jacket.

"A year ago dining at your restaurant, I was 1 ruble short and promised the waiter to make up later. His name was Nikolay, he had a clever round face. Pass it to him, please." And I outstretched a ruble banknote, she silently accepted it…

Besides, I found another place to pass the time for free – the Central Library named after V. I. Lenin. You obtained a ticket there without any money if your passport was on you… That's a really grand place that Central Library after Lenin, yes, indeed, some crossbred of a theater and a metro station, the temple for book-worshipers, in short. Even the door was as tall as a church gate, and bore the inscription on its handle: "pull". And so I did. And behind the door, there was a big vestibule with a porthole in the blind wall, where they gave a free ticket if you had the passport, and then another door to the hall so very awesomely huge.

It turned out to be the cloakroom, yet adorned with white columns and the view to the distant stairs of milky white marble in the far end of the hall. And all around there swarmed the friendship of peoples from the whole of planet in full swing – all kinds of Burmese and Senegalese, yet the Whites also flashed thru. But it seemed to me as if the cloakroom was somehow, like, out of balance with the cloakroom attendants on the right side keeping a-trot between the hangers and the marble barrier, uploading bundles of coats, hither-thither, back and forth, yet the line to them never shortened, while the attendants on the left stood idle and beastly dying of ennui. I felt sorry for them as well as for the trotters, so I turned left and dumped my demi-saison coat upon the white marble barrier of the slackers.

The snooty footmen hardly paid any attention whatsoever, but then one of them looked down his nose at me and in a lordly manner deigned to explain – their half in the cloakroom was for academicians only. Some f-f..er..frightful mix of segregation and discrimination, as if my camel would graze fur off their coats! In short, I thanked the snob for the tip and walked over to the other side which was for mere mortals...

Before the stairs of milky white leading up into the height, there was a narrow gate that I hadn't made out from afar. They checked your ticket at that gate and gave more slips of paper, and only then let go up between a pair of militiamen, standing by so as to instill respect for order.

Up there, high above the cloakroom, stretched the galleries of endless ranks of catalogs in boxes which looked like automatic storage cells, only of wooden color, not metallic. I shuffled thru the cards wired in narrow drawers and found Freud, his lectures published in 1913 on the occasion of some of his jubilees, to commemorate it with the conjuncture publication of just 60 pages. I wrote out all the indexes and other marks of that booklet and went to the reading room to enjoy an hour of pleasure. Greetings!

The attendant scanned thru her glasses my application slip and squeaked up, like, she was calling for the militia when jumped by muggers: Freud?!!

Exactly, says I, I wanna see what the guy was about, be so kind, please.

That's when she rubbed my silly nose in. To have access to the mentioned book, says she, I had to be a PhD of relevant sciences, apart from being also a permanent resident in the Moscow city

(the free ticket testified that I wasn't), and the last but not least, I had to produce a document asserting that gods of the Soviet scientific Olympus allowed me to open the book in question.

My jubilation ceased with a fizzle and in a state of a dejected calm, I climbed down the pasteurized stairs to collect my camel and go… I went out into the street, feeling, like, engulfed with the most profound calmness, as thick as bullet-proof glass; no desire to go anywhere, no wish to want any single thing.

Reaching as far as the underpass to the metro, I leaned my behind against the parapet and once again eyed the pompous building of the Central Library after Lenin. My mind was perfectly empty and somewhere in the background there echoed the lines from Shevchenko:

"... learn what is foreign, keep what is yours..."

Damn, folks! Where am I? The huge temple, the giant letters: Central Library Lenin. What was his ultimate goal? So that workers could read books! His famous bequeath had been drummed into our heads, dinned in the ears, rammed down the throat:

"Learn, learn, and learn!”

And, now what? 4 years before the Great October Revolution, in 1913, any worker could drop into a bookstore and buy those 60 pages of lectures, if so was his wish. After the victory of the mentioned revolution, in the Central Library after Lenin, they told me: "Fuck yourself! there's no book for you because you are a worker!"

Yet even screwed anew, I did not feel myself a looser, I never was it either, it’s only that being possessed by trust to people I got fooled most of the time thanks to my readiness to believe, which they vaccinated me with ages ago but I’m still lazy to ditch the bullshit...

So there I stood, getting rooted into the parapet, with some calm, crystal-like, silent torpor closing in on me... But then a scraping din began to gradually reach from the outside world, I woke up and saw a dozen of workers removing the snow with their shovels along the sidewalk. The sun shone brightly, and its comrades-in-arms scrubbed the asphalt and looked at me as if waiting for something.

And what could I share? I had just got the fuck myself. Or maybe they wanted to scrub along the parapet too? Okay, thank you, mujiks, right you are – clinging to this shell-shock transfixion for any longer would make a gooey show.

So, I tore my roots off the arid granite in tiling blocks and joined the flow down the steps to the underpass, to hide myself from those shining peaks…

On the previously agreed upon morning, the bus came and the senior recycler signed the papers brought by the guide to confirm that they had been driving us for three days all about the capital,

presenting its historical sites and peerless pearls of Moscow architecture. And everyone was satisfied and happy:

guide Olya, who enjoyed 3 days of paid leisure;

the shoppers with their loads of hunted down deficits;

the bus driver with the three-day ration of gasoline which could be put into circulation;

and, most of all, I, with a spare coin in my pocket worth 15 kopecks.

Technologist Valya did not exaggerate – you could have Moscow for 3 days for 3 rubles sharp…

~ ~ ~

The only backwash of the excursion was that I owed the factory those 3 days, I mean 3 daily norms of 32 bales each. Technologist Valya said not to worry though and just produce 2 or 3 surplus bales every day until I made up.

I never liked to be a debtor, so on the third day after coming back from Moscow, I brought to work a newspaper-wrapped snack, aka "brake", to keep me during my fit of Stakhanovite shock work.

When the factory bus took everyone to the city, and Popovka women went home on foot, I faced the slow-go creaky wailer of a press, and the hillocks of rags grown up all around it during my Moscow recreation, whose mass wasn't noticeably reduced in the working day-shift ended just now... Like an enthusiastic champion for the victory of Socialism in a singled-out country, I worked the second shift, then the third, and even managed to sleep in the locker room for about 20 minutes before they came back by bus for the new working day….

In summer, another presser started to work by us and very timely too because Misha the presser went on his annual vacation. The newcomer had some kind of a long oriental name because he was a Tajik, but I could not pronounce it in any way. So I dropped the attempts at unfamiliar phonetics and started to call him simply “Ahmed”.

Ahmed was short and swarthy, and never parted with his happy smile until he tried to enjoy a midday meal in the canteen at the "Motordetail" plant. Returning from there, he stretched out on a bench in the locker room to groan pitifully, while the women from Popovka stood around the sufferer gravely shaking their heads and sharing all kinds of Stone-Age health-care recommendations... After the payday, Ahmed began to come to work with "brakes" wrapped in newspaper and his digestion normalized, upholding my belief in power of printed text...

On his first working day, it was I who passed to him the wisdom and niceties of the presser profession. After exhaustive explanations on the purposes of all the 3 press buttons, followed by live demonstration how a skillful presser was expected to lock the box’s door with the hook

outside it, I started to share to Ahmed my delights caused by the statement of a certain German poet that all seagulls, when in flight, look like the capital "E". And why? The name of his beloved was Emma! That’s a good fellow, ain't he? Eh? What a smart eye!

Enthusiastically grabbing a scrap piece of wire from the floor, I scratched capital E's, a flock of them, in the gray plaster coat of the nearby wall scarcely lit by a bulb over the press...

> (...and now I'm asking myself: why to harass the innocent guy, dumping on him the needless facts in disregard of his poor command of Russian? The answer is simple: so is the human nature. The desire to teach is embedded in our genes.
>
> To visualize this trite truth, look out of the window into the yard and watch the everyday picture: a mujik raised the hood over his car engine and right away a slew of advisers surround him to flash their personal crumbs of ken.
>
> That desire is uncontrollable as proved by the case of the barber who spied the ass ears on King Midas: "I know something! Hearken to me!"...)

Among the wastes brought and dumped at Rags, there at times happened usable things. So, loader Sasha stored in his locker about half-dozen sweaters with and without the rain deer file across their chests; and each day he was sporting another one from his collection...

Volodya Kaverin did not care for small fish. He hunted fur cuffs and collars from discarded coats so that having hoarded enough of them he would order to sew a fur jacket for him or, maybe, a fur coat. 3 collars had been collected so far, and twice a week he used to take them out of his locker, like, to air the goods and, giving them a shake, in turn, he'd proudly ask you, "It should work out a *nyshtyak* jacket, right?"

Vanya, in his locker, was keeping a ceremonial tunic of Lieutenant-Colonel of the Soviet Army with golden shoulder straps and stuff…

When I was sent on the errand to buy vodka from the liquors store on Semashko Street, they at once equipped me with the kind of jeans of which I could be only dreaming when I still cared for such things. It’s only that the maple leaf or, maybe, some kind of a flower embroidered on the right leg was some excessive, in my opinion, detail of design...

The line to the store started way far from it, and it was a pretty tangled line looping with incomprehensible twists over the sidewalk, for which fact such lines were handled "Gorbachev’s loops". But it was not advisable to share the handle too loud because, as the rumors had it, the KGB sec-cols were present midst the thirsty part of the population to pick up fresh jokes and take note of especially dissatisfied citizens.

On the strength of those rumors, I demanded a camouflage outfit from the recycling colleagues, and everyone agreed that, yes, it was necessary, though they did not manage to find me normal jeans without that effeminizing flower on the thigh.

Despite the costly disguise, I still was identified by the pair of errand-boys from SMP-615, however, they chose to keep aloft.

> (...to enter such a line after the working day, and reach the store before it was closed was unthinkable. That's why the enterprises and organizations were necessitated to develop an interlayer of ‘errand-boys’ among their employees. The co-workers covered their absence doing the job "for the guy not there"...)

With its progress, the line ofttimes was shaken by grave rumors that vodka at the store was running out. And indeed, the movement stalled. But soon a truck arrived at the store back and volunteers full of unconcealed enthusiasm dragged inside the wire boxes of 25 bottles each...

I returned to the recycle factory with vodka, at half-past four. 2 loaders, in turn, had been pressing the bales to fulfill my daily norm. Because of inexperience, they produced the bales with underweight. Valya, the bale weigher, expressed her dissatisfaction with loud yells from inside her booth, while half-deaf Misha kept cheerful silence and sprightly dragged the lightweight bales away. His barrow rolled to the Hut outdoors with noticeable acceleration – moving a-pace with the rest of our boundless Homeland of Great October, loader Misha was entering the crucial phase in the reconstruction, aka Perestroika…

~ ~ ~

And with all the deficit of terry towels, the running-water pipe over the tin trough in the washing room, where everyone washed the layered dust off their hands before the meal, there hung no less than a dozen of such towels, angled from among the rags. However, my personal towel was brought from 13 Decemberists, and I kept it in the locker room, hung separately on the heating pipe in the corner by the right window. I was afraid that if left in the washing room, it would be used by inattentive folks like any other piece of garbage hanging there.

How come I had such a deficit? At some of my visits to the village, Raissa Alexandrovna, appreciating my labor achievements about their *khutta*, paid in kind, presenting me a towel and a brand new briefcase. It was a very nice towel, white and fluffy, not for the whole body though, just for the face and hands, judging by its size. And it had a blue squirrel sitting in it in profile with a bushy tail, also very pretty.

Yet one day, coming back from the midday voyage to the remote canteen at the "Motordetail" plant, I noticed that someone's dirty paws had horsed around the tender squirrel in the corner.

Naturally, I kicked up some dust – what the f-f..er..frivolities with my personal belongings?!. My towel was not picked up from the rags in the dirty garbage, I brought it from home! Everyone pointed at Ahmed.

Once again, in detail, I explained, specifically to him, where the towel had been brought from and I urged him to understand and never ever again, under no circumstantial conditions, use it. There were flocks of that crap hanging in the washing room, were those towels not enough for him? He apologized and said he did nah a-know...

So I had to take the towel back to 13 Decemberists and wash it on Monday. On Wednesday, freshly washed and ironed, the blue squirrel was hanging as the pennant of champions for cleanly way of life in the corner of the locker room.

At a half-hour break, I was playing "goat" with the loaders, when the locker room door slammed after belated Ahmed. Murmuring some Tajik folklore tune, he bypassed the table covered with the sketchy line of bones.

Vanya jabbed me into the side and pointed with his chin into the corner, meaning "look at the prankster!" Ahmed meticulously, like the surgeon before operating on Lucy Mancini, was wiping his wet paws on the bushy tail of my squirrel. But, by the sidelong glance from under the squint of his olive eyelids, I figured it out that he knew it as well as I did that he was no fucking doctor.

"Ahmed," said I, and general attentive silence suspended all the motion in the locker room. "As I see, you fell for the creature, eh? I present it to you together with the towel."

"Oy, I forgotta!"

"Presents are not to be discussed. Take it, it's yours."

And I slammed 2 doubles at both ends of the bones line on the tabletop.

> (...he did pay back to me in full for that German poet with his letter-like seagulls, after all, or, maybe, he did not condone me "Ahmed"...)

~ ~ ~

A couple of presses were located outside the pressing section. When I got the task of pressing waste paper by one of them, it was like going out of the dungeon because the press was installed next to a big freshly installed window. And under the window, there were the baggage scales as well, on which Misha the loader checked the weight of the waste paper bales and said it to me. Then he dragged them straight to the Quonset Hut because it was 2 times closer than from the pressing section. That's why Valya, the weigher, gave me a pencil, and she instructed me to keep the record of the produced paper bales' kilos, and at the end of working day hand her the list so that she would copy the figures into her ledger... And that very pencil made of me an irreparable graphomaniac case.

At first, I used it to write the columns of figures into the hardly started, yet discarded, copybook of the fourth-grade student Lyouba Dolya, picked up from the hillock of waste paper. But then, under creaks and groans of the slowly creeping press shield, the pencil suddenly, and completely of its own accord, wrote *The Landscape*, a short verbal picture with a puzzling punch line. I read that page from the schoolgirl's copybook and saw that it was perfect. I did like it – not a word to be added or taken away.

The Landscape was followed with *The Still Life* against a winter background, and *The Portrait* from a summertime. Together with *The Pastoral*, they composed *The Vernissage* of four paintings.

But all that came later, because *The Landscape* was just the pencil's testing the water, after which it started to write the initial dialogue in the short story *Sehryoga Drenches Horses* or the summer piece. Later, there came the winter, spring, and autumn pieces comprising the collection *The Four Seasons* of a certain writer Bidlook.

Of course, not all of those works were finished with the same pencil, yet it served the spring-board to all what followed. The pencil put a spell on me, transformed me into a hypnotized zombie in order to use the prehensile capacity of my fingers as a holder while it went on writing, line after line, in other scraps of paper, because Lyouba Dolya's school copybook was soon over.

(...just think of it – some offal teeny stub of a pencil...)

When *The Four Seasons* pieces were finished, I wanted to see them in a typewritten form, yet felt strongly against going to the typist pool again, I didn't even know why.

In the one-room public library on the first floor of an apartment block in Zelenchuk Area, I discovered a typewriter with Ukrainian letters. There worked 2 librarians: a woman of retirement age, and a fat girl in glasses, like, a granddaughter of the senior lady, whom she called "granny" anyway. My attempt at borrowing the typewriter met a cold reception. They did not know what I was going to type while knowing that the KGB had stored a sample text written with their typewriter. The senior lady shared also that, by a tacit regulation, the KGB had a collection of samples by typewriters from all the city organizations.

Everything was extremely simple and logical, were I to type some anti-Soviet proclamations the organs in charge would immediately find out whom to catch by the gills.

(...it's nice to realize that you are protected by so shrewd organs...)

Then I asked for permission to type one story directly in their room, at the desk behind the bookshelves and I would leave the carbon copy by them. The lady shook her head in doubt, but the granddaughter persuaded her to allow.

Oh, my! What an up-hill job was typing! It took me 2 days off to tap thru one page and a half. Poor librarians! The knocking out one letter after another with my clumsy index finger had fretted their brains away for sure. The end product was still full of typos but the librarian girl liked it, although she had never in her life heard the colloquialism "to drench horses" and, reportedly, had to ask from her friends for elucidation...

That's why I had to restore my relations with Zhomnir because once upon a time he proudly showed me a portable typewriter stored in his archive chamber... He could not lend it to me but, as a representative of the intellectual elite, was obliged to allow me solving my creative problems

within his archive chamber. And Maria Antonovna had loved me anyway, all along. So I started visiting Nezhyn again, on weekends.

Zhomnir demonstrated the way of using all the fingers for typing with the typewriter. Maria Antonovna was making a bed for me on the folding coach-bed in their living room. I typed at nights and in the morning walked to the railway station for a cup of hot coffee. In the daytime, I went on typing on their tiny balcony. From the height of the fifth floor, I had a nice view of the green trees far below, and the red brick chimney of the stoker-house rising from among them. I watched the pigeon flock tumbling in the sky and tucked another sheet of paper into the typewriter.

I liked that way of life, although at times I remembered that it was Nezhyn and then the nostalgia welled up. Rather, I did not forget where I was, not even for a single moment, and the nostalgia retreated only before the clatter of the typewriter…

The final in the winter piece of *The Four Seasons* genuinely outraged Zhomnir, "Look! It's ridiculous! How could a man be such a fool!" But I was happy because he did not find faults with the language in my story, his scornful ire was kindled by the protagonist!

In the way of restitution for farming out his typewriter, Zhomnir, for ol' time's sake, was passing English poems to me for translation. Kipling, Shelly, Frost... I was translating and bringing them back on weekends, but that does not count, I still kept writing poems of my own kicked out.…

By the Soviet labor legislation, every worker in the USSR enjoyed an annual vacation. In autumn I got it after eleven months of slaving at the recycling factory. I did not make plans on where to spend my vacation because I knew perfectly well where exactly I was going.

˜~˜~˜

~ ~ ~ The Eastern Corridor

Thru condensed dark of expiring night, little by little begins to show the darker, solid, blackness of the windbreak belt along the roadside.

...for any vehicle, the road of this quality stands for the capital punishment with no chance of appealing to Philip Sober yet my shank's pony doesn't mind...nothing will get you farther than a pair of good dogs...a walker makes five kilometers per hour, they taught us in school...by Uncle's estimation, the district center is in 15 kilometers, no more...I started at a little past 5, the bus to Moscow departs at 9... jingling gods and jumping jugs! life's a delicious *havvage*!. ...especially under the favorable wind...

> ***“ The wind blows right from behind***
>
> ***what's on your mind?***

The sailing will be plain

to fetch a bottle of Portwein..."

...slow down, little one, don't rush when cutting corners...the dry law is vigilantly lurking, mind the Prohibition... *Dura lex, sed lex…* wanna a translation?.

...don't you worry, buddy, Latin is a bro from the home neighborhood...

...yet the vulgarity! the meanness of the subject: "portwein", "a bottle", flat as a pancake...

...then what?..show respect to the art of hammerers...a folklore item...next to iambic...

...no iambi-zombie talk, private...or we'll have you rotten with fatigues at dactyl...

...ha!.. who're you?..a self-taught good for nothing...screw up your loose screw first...a gourmand with fluffy chopsticks... "ah, iambus is not yummy! may I have some choree with a sprinkle of trochee, please?"...how about grayling under sherry then?...

...hmm, yes...the chorees are dying out...fucked, in fact, by the hostile ecology...arid vistas are closing in – 'warmly approving the saved reserves we will hold aloof the initiative of the plan in excess replete with the deepest satisfaction ahead of time by centners of running meters from a hectare of rolled metal'...feel free to start up the red book for all the elegant belles-lettres...doomed darlings...not a chance for survival...the golden days of muses gulped down by the abyss of past...

"The wrath sing, goddess, of the Peleus' son, Achilles..."

...this single line of hexameter calls for 2 square meters of footnotes so that the folks suckled and brought up with the editorials from Central Press would get it what exactly that fucker Achilles wants of the Brazilian football star's kid...but think of the paper deficit!..we need it for printing about the growth of wealth and well-being!.

...you know the truth: if you want to live but there is no one to live with, you have to live with anyone you come across...that's why folks adore folklore...the perfection itself, mind you, can be found among those handcrafted items...here, for your consideration:

"Who of you, bastards, dared label God a rasp?!."

In the dark, already slightly graying, over the deserted road sounds a snort of a restrained chuckle. The black clot of a tree floats up along the roadside and falls back.

...yeah, they did school you to toe the line...who's around here to look back at your causeless laugh?...

"I walk, and I keep smiling to myself

and at the thought 'what would they think of me?'

I into laughter burst..."

...another piece crafted in the neighborhood?...

...no, it's by some Czech with a tilt towards poetry...

...you mean, Czechs are not homies?..I'll have your throat cut!...

...have mercy, oh, Abraham!..check in the bush maybe we'll square it up with Yahweh keeping your sonny unscratched...

...and if I am Taras Bulba?...

...oh, yes!..in the dried form, pressed for the herbariums...Robinson Crusoe's goat is more of a Cossack than you...drop your bragging before the neighbor's nanny-goat got chocked and died in a laughter fit...

...not a chance...they say that laughter is the sovereign property of Khoma Sapiensoff...

...well, from the standpoint of physiology all is radiant clear – spasms and coughs tremendously benign to health, but how to grasp it from the significance's point of view?...

...I love challenger kids, yes I do!..let's have a look...where are the decent people laughing?..right, in the places specifically designated for the purpose...that’s where you have to look for an answer...like, in the circus or, say...

...hurray!..to the movies, we are going!..that's some comedy!... Fantozzi, what a good fellow!..wow!..knows his trade!...

Bang! Ding! Plop! Chink! Pisssssss...

Glee and guffaw, giggling, laughter beyond all the limits and past all the bounds.

Boo-ooh-ha! Ha-ho-ho! Gu-gu-hu! Wu-hu-hu!

And only my neighbor to the left, a lady of immense proportions, sits listless, silent. Why? Dozed off or what? No, dutifully gazes at the silver screen, still yielding no reaction.

The man in there does his best to turn her on, he takes a run to hit his head against the lamppost. The hall reports by a happy volley... And she? Good news she's not yawning.

But what's that? Unbelievable! At a minor episode, where Fantozzi, after another fall, plop, splash, whizzz, changes in a suit five times bigger his size and the public almost do not react, exhausted in the previous convulsions, that's when from the exorbitant volumes of my neighbor rolls out the laughter of the same dimensions. Well done, comedian! But how do you start her?

...and now, when asked: why do people laugh?..my answer is – because of fear...

...fear?!..

...exactly!..you can't put your finger on anything more dreadful for a woman than uglifying clothes... while, when the comedian's bicycle drops its saddle on the run and the zany lands with his asshole onto the pipe still sticking up there, the hall is swaying from the males' guffaw... a lady, naturally, can weather by such a trifle...

...laughter from fear!..nonsense!..they do not laugh but flee when scared...besides, your arguments are based on laughter of the basest sort...and people laugh because of not only that someone stumbled-slipped-sprawled-fell-into-the-drains, they laugh at witticisms as well...then, there are still epigrams...there's a hell of lots of ways to have a hearty laugh...

...verily, verily, I say unto you!..laughter comes from fear and is both request and prayer begging Unknown to avert the thing they laugh at, to keep it off the prayer sayer, I mean, off them who's splitting their sides...and same exactly foundation underlies the laughter caused by the finest witticisms...where "ha-ha-ha" reads: "let me never be a target of such a joke!"...while laughing at oneself is just a prayer: "let I never again step into it!"...they are inseparable Siamese – fear and laughter...tell me what you laugh at and I'll tell what you are afraid of!...

...so, Fool, you mean to say that someone who never laughs, is not afraid of anything?.

...Your Majesty!..we are not considering abnormal anomalies, the subject at hand is a representative of the class of vertebrates, the subclass of mammals, the species of primates, the subspecies of anthropoid with the Latin name "homo sapiens."..so don't f-f..er..fret our brains, please...

...but look, then it means that by the means of a joking you can find out...

...aha!..starting to see?..excellent!..on we go!..and here, by the way, a kilometer post... ...what does it tell?..no, I can't make out, it's still dark.

...well, to hell!..let it be...it's not the first neither the last...stop molesting orphan ones!..do you need it? yomp your way...

Oh, I'm sorry. No crooked tricks or dirty intent, I swear. Once again, please, forgive. Have a nice stay!

...hmm...so, what were we about?..ah, well, of course!..considering the immortal question hoisted by the classic: "What are you laughing at?"...the answer is: at something that we fear to learn

firsthand...what is the forerunner of laughter?..that's right – a smile...and what is the smile?..right once again – the show of teeth...let's say, we meet each other at the lowest rungs of the evolutionary ladder, where I can't see what kind of stegosaurus you are, and you suspect me of being lungfishy...at that uneducated period, we roamed without passports...now, we meet and – first and foremost – what?..that's right!..we bare our teeth, like, look what I have, in case of you allow yourself excessive liberties...see, where all these laugh-hiccups and giggle-spasms spring from?...boiled down to its elementary basis, laughter is a means of self-defense with a Hegelian dual function – to shoo away and carry favor (2 in 1)...it is used, however, not in case of real danger (it's not the right time for giggling) but when the threat is an imaginary one...they don't use it in absence of threat, or imagination, or when there is nothing to protect...using its monopoly on the gizmo under our consideration, the man climbed up to the top of the aforesaid ladder up to the level where they issue passports and enroll you, if so is your wish, to gyms to learn kickboxing...Amen...

...wow!..it's time to shout "eureka!" and jog off to the patent office...

...why, silly sweetheart?..it's been a long time since all the wheels were reinvented...any supernova idea was brewing more than once in brains of a Chaldean priest, or a Greek sophist, a medieval alchemist, an Aztec knot-tier, a prophetic Brahman, or a Tibetan sage...all discoveries and uber-super ideas are nothing more than using other words or symbols for the same truths old as the hills...invariable, as the change of seasons, or phases of the moon, of day and night rotation...every day is new and unique, every day is a repetition of myriad of lots of exactly same days...

...you know how to wrap it nicely, smart Alec...yet, there's a question from the audience: did you fix the shit firm enough, citizen?...

...sit tight, marijuanisto!..no chance you tear it off unless you've got some hugely "bitter but" up your sleeve, or have you?...

...uh-oh, alas, but, yes, Your I-ness...where—in the scintillating shebang of yours—would you place the smile of a two-month-old baby?..what is it afraid of, when smiling to its mother, or nenka, or mutter, or whatever?..that toothless smile seems to flush all you mental juggle-schmuggle straight down the drain...ain't it, Mr. Brilliant Kid?.

It's dawning. Murky-gray ceiling of dissolving darkness overhead gets propped by the endless walls of hazy trunks alongside both roadsides, veiled with a mesh of hunger-black branches and chance twigs still bearing haphazard spots of withered leaves. Along the shredded asphalt, the comets of tiny snow specks are scuttling, swaying, drifting off their orbits, whirling their thinned streams of dry powder snow.

The wind is favorable. From behind. So blow, buddy, blow! Not a chance you ever pierce the padded jacket presented by my aunt. The head in the tight-knitted "cock" hat, warm socks on the feet in the sturdy likes of army boots. The road under the current of whipped-up snow streams stretches to the horizon to merge with infinity... Blow, the curly one! The ancient Greeks found it

out, sounding flute makes the march easier. Sturdy rig, firm trail, what else would you want for to be happy?

A cleft in the windbreak belt let a country road fork off. Thru the gap, there peeps a surprised field: who's so happy here? And because of that field, and of that make-believe road ahead, and because of so grim morning with the pale-transparent streams of white snow scudding on under the wind, a sudden jubilant delight and silly joy cut loose welling up the throat to splash out a cry into the confused desert around, "I! Am! Happy!" The snow streams whisked up along the asphalt keep silent, busily reflecting, like a mirror, the whirlwind spirals in the clouds galloping so low overhead.

"Am! Happy!" Repeating, somehow with a threat and as if inquiringly.

"Happy!" This time sounds sad already.

...yes...the music played but shortly...where are you, happiness?..only in the past or in the future...some elusive illusion...

...and when coming across its tiny speck I'm always alone...why so?..it even hurts somehow...now, if she were by...though she needs no hiking marches...or if she watched on a screen, in a dream, anywhere – this very morning, and this crippled road, a solitary traveler along...

...dumb moron!..will you ever get it?..stupid wretch!..there is no "she" at all but only your driveling indistinct dreams unclear even to the dreaming fool...dreams of an impossible conjunction of heavenly beauty and passion for pleasures of quite earthly nature, a non-existent combination of cold-sharp mind and cunt clinging fervently which craves for you and only you...shut your lusty gape, kiddo...you've built a bridge atop a mountain and keep a-waiting for a river to run under...and besides, to get some anything you need to give some kind of something...and what, with your kind permission, do you have to offer?..this dapper dandy padded jacket?..wow!..yes, some heavy-duty rig...and being worn for just a week, no longer...what?..there's even money on you?..50 rubles?!..but that's a jackpot!..now, subtract the tenner for a bus ticket, then 25 for the flight to Kiev, and the fiver for the local train...and keep in mind the *havvage* expenses...now, give me one good reason for expecting tender love and crazy passion?...

...castes are divided by the abyss unbridgeable...who do you pull for?...where d'you belong?... what are you: a master or a slave?…

...I am what I am what I am at the fifth bottom after the ninth gate...your 'master' trap is a too cheap try, everybody's got at least three masters – Stomach, Genitals, and Brain...the deeper you dig the more of them spring out which one to serve?…so could you get off my back, please?.

...show proper respect to der Heilige Arthur's teaching, infidel...he sez we cannot change ourselves, we're only capable of getting to know us a tad bit better, and it's me who widens your

horizons, pal, be grateful to your constant second...or, mayhap, you wanna swap our ordinal numbers?.

...cut out this empty ding-dong, you knows yoursel – the first to wake up retains the slippers all day long so there's no use to shuffle kings, and cabbage, and walruses, and carpenters...

...to saddle then! and back to your trinity of Masters...if only you don't want to look for a suitable outsider, Genosse Feldzug-Führer...

...shut up with your red herring!…any raccoon at the Central Committee axiomatically slaves for his stomach...to be a slave's slave?...count me out! I do not care for his stomach...neither for fucking dialectics with all due respect to imbibed Socrates…

...but then what else to busy me with? I cannot do a better job than my legs…

...enough! no more quibbling!...say it in plain words – are you a master or a slave?…

...damn! you are a nail-hard customer...okay, I am the master of my cock if it will make you happy…

...great!...that makes 33 % plus… you're cooking on gas, bro!...so on we go, would you devour your neighbor at the demand of your empty stomach?…

...I don't think so…

...yes or no, sweetie?...

...no!...fuck you!…

...good boy! now, I see myself whom I've loved so much...and, by the by, you're at level 66 % plus...now, to disentangle the remainder of the Gordian lacework…

...but I don't remember what we were about…

...stop your zigzagging!...it's master or slave choice...who rules who, you know…

...oh!...I'm more tired than my legs already...well, as long as my system is kept in check by means of…

...enough!...no more words!..."means of" is nothing but an instrument...congrats, Mr. Master-unto-Yoursel...two words of warning though...don't stick your neck out nor try to change the world because a revolutionary without a supporting party is as ridiculous as a stateless citizen...and if I were you I wouldn't kick up much sing and dance about God's being dead 'cause all we need is Master giving us commands...but let's peep out into the wide wild world...what are you personally out there?…

...I have no slaves!...nor need any…

...easy, corner-cutter...a slave owner is someone else’s slave in 99 % plus...and you know as well as I do that having none does not exempt you...so, whose one are you?... Maugham’s?... John Mill’s?…

...yes, yes, yes!...as well as of that topless nuts who popped up above the fence in the Area...I am a slave to all and everything, yet temporarily, until my expiration date or simply getting bored…

...seems like we’ve run into another vicious circle with no chance to be resolved at the round table in m/u 41769’s stoker house, sorry for interrupting your trudge...wipe your snots and just keep walking...some business you're a specialist in…

And he walks, stepping on the tails of the transparent bands of scampering grains of snow. Each step is no different from the previous one, none of the steps changes a jot of the road, and neither the low leaden sky, nor the walls in windbreak belts on both sides get changed in any way.

...all and the same...that same all...everything moves to stays the same…

Occasionally, a concrete kilometer post with figures in a blue squarelet of tin approaches gradually to fall behind. A few hours of such uninterrupted walking, even without any load, and the ache, slight but nagging, would seep into the shoulder bones. He knows that. But not on this day. The district center is at most 15 kilometers from the village, as said by his uncle. And from the town there starts the transport services of a developed civilization...

Something looms at a distance on the roadside; some huge object. Fixing his gaze on that motionless strangeness midst the general chaotic stir, he is nearing it, trying to guess from afar: what could it be?

...some machinery...aha...and what kind of it?...

...who knows, they're tinkling out lots of them for agriculture...let's get closer and then…

A weeny burning sensation breaks up in his bladder.

...would you but wait a bit with your urges?..yes, machinery, yet from another sphere…

He stops by a tangerine-yellow road roller.

...how could you possibly get to it, poor thing?..feels chilly, eh?..no doubt...way too accustomed to asphalt tropics...bituminous heat and stuff...what are your plans for to survive the winter?..no escape to warmer countries, too heavy on the rise, besides, it's too late...and no tool to dig a furrow for yourself, not your specialization...anabiosis remains the only chance, buddy ...freeze into the surrounding environment like them those cold-blood earth-water animals...though not a bed of roses too…

He pours his empathy out onto the scattering of small-sized gravel, then zips the fly up and steps over the uneven dark spot in the road, which a couple of hours before was tea prepared by Uncle's wife for a meal.

...everything flows, everything changes...one and the same tea can’t be poured out twice…

~ ~ ~

It was his second visit to the village where he was now walking from. The first time though he did not come himself but was brought by his Dad. The days in that summer lasted forever, unhurried, like the slow stream splitting the village into ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’. The knee-deep water in the quiet creek was rolling soundlessly along the sandy bottom. A little bit upstream you got into the green-shaded tunnel in between the walls of dense Willow thicket. Whitebait brushed ticklishly against the shanks. It feels creepy, especially when you are 12 and they told you some scary stories about leeches and "horsehair".

And beyond the village, quite at a distance, maybe at an hour's walk, there was the river Mostya not too wide but enough for a swim. And he was swimming to the opposite bright grassy bank and pushing the red-and-blue ball ahead over the water, watching the blurred spot of his face reflected in the wet, spinning, sides of the ball. Or was that ball and the green bank by some other river of his childhood? Yet, the fact remained that he entered the Mostya river as well. 20 years before…

Twenty years later, on his second visit, he did not enter it. It was too cold for swimming. Late autumn. Emptiness reigned in the wide sway of the fields. Empty was the village with small hillocks of crushed bricks – ruins of houses overgrown with rank grass. “Khan Mamai's horde was here”. The remaining huts were silent, squatting lowly as if pressed down by the ocean of faded sky. At the bottom of the Marianas Trench.

"Looking for whom?"

"Sehrguey Mikhailovich Ogoltsoff."

"And who are you?"

"Sehrguey Ogoltsoff."

"So, the nephew?" guessed she quickly.

"Exactly," he agreed, holding a smile back.

She invited to go over into the room and was sorry that the uncle had just left for work after the midday break, and she didn’t forget to praise the scrawny cat thoroughly washing his face all the morning to predict arrival of guests. Then she returned to the kitchen and the four-meter-long thread-chain doubled in-and-out the small *teremok*-hut time-piece on the opposite wall by the

ceiling, gravity-driven to produce slow ticks slicing hollow silence in the empty room except for the table between 2 windows, below the clock, under the worn-out oil-cloth hanging over the plywood doors in its box and the crowd in the black-and-white cluster of close and distant relatives, and their special friends of sundry sizes, persistent stares from the silent iconic faces similarly mute and petrified for the ceremonial shot, in the corner left free by the Russian oven comprising half of the space.

He sat leaning against the backrest of the couch, beneath a narrow arched window to the front garden, checking the interior in the single room with a brick stove opposite his feet, from which a smooth gray pipe of asbestos-concrete rose up and, by the ceiling, veered to the kitchen wall.

Next to the stove, stood a broad bed with paint-coated legs and siderails, carrying a pyramidal tower of cushions next to the plush carpet pinned up by small nails over the wall, in which, on some of the thousand-and-one nights, the young man abducted a bashful beauty on his plush stallion, and his accomplice followed them, with a parting glance over his shoulder at the minarets in the sleeping city. The plywood hide-out of brown wardrobe idled connivingly in the corner for their arrival.

On this side, next to the couch, stood a table beneath the second of the arched windows, with chairs pushed under it and, by the blank wall to the neighbors', a television set on a high shelf.

From under the TV to the kitchen door a rug-mat stretched, following the directions of the planks in the ceiling overhead, naked and blue... She tinkled plates washing up in the kitchen, occasionally coming to the door of the room to ask if his parents were healthy, and where he worked, and what's his job. By the cautiousness of the questions, he got it that she knew. As if it could be otherwise. His father, since retired, was visiting his native village almost every summer, bringing along his granddaughter too. He surely shared his troubles with his brother.

The kitchen’s entrance door banged, "Grandma! Two fives!"

"You’re back?" responded she with tender strictness. "Take off your jacket. And do not shuffle that way. Go say 'hello' to the uncle, (to the whispered question) your mom's cousin."

From behind the door handle, the boy's face with a strand of hair sticking up in a cow-lick above the right corner of the steep forehead slowly peeped in, with the childishly serious look.

After a prolonged "hello-oo" he disappeared to go on with the inaudible questioning of his grandmother.

"Lenochka's dad," answered she laying the table. "Remember her staying at grandma Sasha's last summer?"

She invited the guest to the table. Supping the meal, the schoolboy looked at the window with a dejected stare. Could you remember what they see with such wide-open gaze those seven-year-old aliens until another question about school brings them back to their senses?

Well, at least the unknown uncle from nowhere was eating silently. The boiled potatoes with fried onions the boy rejected, as well as the tea.

The grandmother sent him to the village smithy to tell his grandfather about the guest, who with a polite ‘thank-you’ returned to the couch... Full of lean satiety, he sat in the congested sleepy silence wrapping the house.

Outside the 2 windows behind his back, the gray wind cooed and wooed with impetuous gusts the Apple tree in the front garden, who angrily waved away the inconstant any lady's man... It's time to insert the inner frames for winter... In front of him, thru the velvety-lilac night, the kidnappers were still galloping mutely with their capture. Although she might be happy to be stolen and not stay by the old vizier with his fat eunuchs…

~ ~ ~

It's weird, the extent of how fully everything around was befitting me. And so it would be on all the following days of the vacation... In the evenings I'd be visiting my aunt Alexandra to overeat her pancakes, and once even a chicken. Some rich villager was my aunt.

In the mornings after breakfast, when my uncle, the blacksmith, went by bicycle to his smithy, I ventured to roam over the fields, and after the midday meal, I was cutting logs from the hillock of firewood dumped next to the house, for the winter.

A beautiful Russian woman Valentina, by her husband's last name – Zhelezina, my cousin and the mother of Maxim, the outstanding student living in the house of his grandparents, would encourage me to visit her house, where she kept the younger ones – the hooligan Volodka and post-toddler Tanyooshka, who still did not want to part with her pacifier.

She would retell me the village gossips, and her life in Moscow, where she was courted by a Frenchman, and in Kustanai, where she was married to a German from the local colonists.

Her current husband would take me to the village store, and I would drink bottled beer and listen to mujiks' talk of nothing but with so native intonations that it takes your breath away with the sentimental sympathy.

And by that time my aunt would have already bestowed a black padded jacket, which was the obligatory outfit for anyone there, except for kids and teenagers, so that I did not stick out like a sore thumb in my checkered jacket...

Some ante-biblical simplicity of life, and at the same time with so many admixtures... An old woman came to the store to exchange potatoes from her garden for kolkhoz kopecks, her utter poverty showed thru but the mujiks around were next to bowing, caps in hand, before her. She’s a relic of their past – the embodiment of the old-regime landowners, yet they needed that relic and would create it from a poor retired teacher if only her facial features were delicate enough...

Returning from one of the supper evenings at my aunt's, I, for some reason, stopped in my tracks at nothing around, and for a long stretch was staring in the dry tall grass. What for?. The next evening my aunt affirmed that, yes, my grandmother Martha's hut had been exactly in that spot.

On the last night before leaving, I came with the farewell visit to Valentina's house. My checkered jacket turned out exactly her husband's size, they were obviously impressed with such generosity and were calling the jacket "a suit". To Valentina, I presented my suspiciously feminine bag. I did manage to get rid of it after all...

We went out into the darkness of the street without houses. Everyone understood that we would never see each other again. Valentina embraced me and wept. I stroke the shoulder of her padded jacket and said, "Boodya, sister." Then I shook hands with her husband Zhelezin and went away.

It's so strange, in my whole life, I never heard or used that soothing word of "boodya", it came out all by itself, spontaneously... I come from here, it's where I belong, sad pity I'll be of no use for my own…

~ ~ ~

People started making wry faces at me as early as the bus station near the Izmaylovo Park, where the Ryazan-Moscow bus arrived. At Zhulyany airport in Kiev, where I disembarked the midnight flight from Moscow, the hostile attitude to me from the folks around increased exponentially to confirm the correctness of the old saying – people judge you by your *zek* outfit.

The public opinion on my account was voiced in the morning by a passenger on the platform in the underground metro station, "Where the fuck do you barge thru among the people?"

I differed from them by my being a black man. The black padded jacket, black pants, black army boots. Only the "cock" hat on my head fell out of the ensemble with its brown and blue stripes. It would seem more or less excusable were I loaded with some kind of luggage, but a black man with his hands in his pockets is outrageous, it's a challenge to the social order, it's a cheeky *bomzh*... We bypass them with an unseeing glance, so that to avoid any eye contact—save, God! —or we bark, "Where the fuck do you barge thru among the people?"

True, in those days we did not know the word *bomzh* yet, and for such sort of people, they used the term *bych*. "Where do you barge, you *bych*?.. Get out of here, fucking *bych*!"

The word was brought by the seamen who had sailed abroad. There, in the port cities, the drifters spending nights on the beach, collecting the scraps and offal left by vacationers were called "beach-combers". Our people did not care for the whole word and borrowed only the first half of it. So the folks without a certain place of residence and of obscure occupation got labeled *byches*. A short, biting term. However, it died out.

Firstly, those who did not speak English and never went to the sea began to slip into synonyms, substituting *knoot* (which in Russian means "whip") for *bych* that in Russian also means "whip". And, secondly, abbreviations are always stronger, especially when supported by the state.

(...we are all from the USSR, got it? Whoever does not understand will receive clarification in the CheKa, aka the KGB...)

When the law enforcement organs abbreviated the "without a certain place of residence" that turned in Russian into BOMZh, other terms had no chance for survival.

In the great and mighty Russian language, you cannot find a synonym to *bomzh*. The nearest to it "tramp" or "bum" smack of mothballs and infantile lisp of the Indian cinema…

Once upon a time in Russia there lived peddlers, aka offenny. In order to survive, they invented a language of their own. Dark for uninitiated, the Offenny language went into oblivion together with its carriers – no one bothered to compose its dictionary.

The current *fenya* of the criminal world is also for initiated but has nothing to do with the defunct Offenny except for echoing the latter's name. Considering *fenya* the language of Russian mafia is not correct because from Russian it borrowed only grammatical structures, and the vocabulary is fairly international. Kicked out of secondary school, half-educated students when continuing their careers as jail-birds poured in *fenya* the bits and scraps of words they heard at foreign language classes. That way *fenya* feathered its hat with *atas*! (from the French "l'attention!"), *haza* (from the German "Hause"), *havvat* (from the English "have a"), as well as manifold borrowings from the languages in the family of friendly and free brother nations fused into the common, unsplittable, USSR.

(...however, back to my *malyava*, aka letter (*fenya's* term from the German "mahlen")...)

The champion for the public fundamental morals, who offended me in the metro, had no notion that under the appearance of a black man there lived in me a vulnerable tender soul as well as the digestive tract of a delicate constitution. I did not suspect it myself until I felt how, after the mentioned insult, I gradually became "mournful in the belly" because the intestines began revolting after the traumatic discovery that in public eye they were a constituent part of a bum.

About the Maidan, which then was named Square of October Revolution, it became clear that I could not hold back the pressure of the tides that stormed the ampoule (which follows the large intestine) and that there remained no hope for reaching the greens by the University, with the only public toilet known to me in the downtown part of Kiev. Fortunately, I remembered the Ministry of Education with their ministerial toilet on the second floor, and not too far from the square, it's only that the intemperately intensive rioting within my system called for additional suppressive efforts…

I flung the tall entrance door open and rushed, in a concentrated jog, up the marble stairs.

"Hey! Where?" shouted the attendant from the chair to the left from the entrance.

"Plumbing system check," reported I over my shoulder, without slowing down the businesslike strides...

When all the sorrows subsided, I left the restroom, polished like a malachite jewelry case, and descended the wide white stairs, with the demeanor of archangel Gabriel in dignified idle stroll and, maybe, even gleaming blissfully.

I wanted to share the Good News and, turning my face to the attendant, informed benevolently, "Hey, look! The check says it's okay around here. Yea!." And I went out into the blatantly atheistic Karl Marx Street, between two dense walls of the like, severely administrative, buildings.

> (...Karl certainly knew it's only thanks to the collective efforts that Man managed to become Crown of Nature. Because single-handed you can neither kill a mammoth not fly to the moon.
>
> But how fragile the state of unity is!. How willingly and readily we do split ourselves, humans, by the color of skin and hair, by caste, faith, party affiliation: they are not us, we are not them, we're higher prized, at least for 1 ruble...
>
> Some unsolvable mystery – how the assemblage of ape-shaped boobs keeps able for collective achievements, given their chronic proneness to self-castration?..)

~ ~ ~

My visit to Kanino kicked off the rise of national self-awareness within me. For a descendant of Novgorodian ushkuynik robbers and Tatar raiders, who for centuries were raping Ryazan womenfolk, taking turns with less stable, accidental, bands of fuckers, it was not appropriate, and even disreputable, to earn my living by giving hugs, on a daily basis, to the stinking undisinfectioned shit of rags when shoving them into the press box.

So, for the first time in my working career, I applied for firing me on the strength of my own free will. Now, in my workbook, the disparaging Article 40 got obscured by the perfectly acceptable standard record "dismissed on the application"—who would look any deeper?—and I went to hire on in the KahPehVehRrZeh Plant.

Everything went without a hitch, I had smoothly past the medical checks but at the final stage, already at the personnel department, I suddenly heard "no go". Why not?

As it turned out, there remained no quota for me. The head of the personnel department exposed it in detail, that there were tacit but strict regulations forbidding to hire a person with higher education to become a workman among the workforce of fewer than 1000 undiplomized employees. In the plant collective of 5000, there remained no extra thousand to allow for my case, some sons of a bitch with diplomas arrived before me and exhausted the quota.

> (...the disappointment did not kill me, I somehow used to cope with falling through, nevertheless, it was a significant shock to realize the existence of the "shadow" legislation, ignorance of which did not exempt you from its application...)

So I went to the city outskirts opposite the Settlement, to the "Motordetail" plant where I was hired on as a bricklayer in the Construction Shop Floor. The bastards with diplomas had not infiltrated yet the large modern enterprise.

If we subtract the *havvage* in its canteen, the plant "Motordetail" stood out as a crystal-like embodiment of dream model for an industrial enterprise and a casual walk over its Construction Shop Floor was enough to confirm the statement. The spacious locker rooms attractively paneled with tiling in brown colors of the spectrum were combined with as spacious (and also tiled, not just cemented) shower rooms. The recollection of the said conveniences, waiting for you at the end of the day, would warm your heart during the working hours.

I knew my job and was used as a bricklayer-loner for non-standard tasks in separate spots of application. They would equip me with a pair of helpers to fetch bricks and mortar and—off we drive!—the drum brickwork of wall in an underground water well, or erecting chimneys over the roofs in two-apartment cottages...

I liked the frequent change of tasks: each one required a special approach and circumspection which kept your mind from slipping into sloth and your spine from growing stiff. And for the periods of relative calm between the missions, I was sent to the team of bricklayers at the construction of the 130-apartment block for the plant employees in the neighborhood adjacent to the plant. The team there were no aces, but it was they to live in what they built…

Neither in the locker room nor with the team was I a dream gossip. When asked of something, I would reply and then again keep silent while indetectably talking to myself in my mind… Besides, my helpers were replaced way too often. Their rotation was seen to by Narcological Department 2, shortened to Narco-2.

Narco-2 constituted the crucial part in the conveyor production of slaves.

Slaves in the epoch of Developed Socialism? Well, let’s not forget the spiral-like advancing of the historical progress. The system worked as follows: a militia van rushed into a village and grabbed a pair of mujiks indicated by the village council chairman as prone to alcohol consumption. (And who is not?)

The catch was brought to Narco-2 for the treatment of alcoholism. Anyone entertaining an indecently high opinion of his human rights got a shot of sulfur and, until the end of the treatment, he carefully avoided risks of picking up the subject any more...

The treatment term spanned from 2 to 3 months. The patients lived in the hostel, ate their *havvage* in the canteen, worked wherever they would send them.

NO PAYMENT FOR THEIR WORK

All of their payment was withheld as reimbursement for their accommodation, *havvage*, and medical care. The mentioned medical care was the pills dispensed to the patients after the working day, which they immediately flushed down the toilet.

If keeping a low profile, they were allowed to visit their villages on weekends...

In cities, Step 1 in the procedure was simplified. The precinct militia officer announced to the drunks on his beat whose turn it was to go for the treatment and they knew they'd be better off if falling in line.

> (...the first Marxist group in Russia bore the telling name of "Liberation of Labor" and —lo!—with the inexorable historic logicality, one hundred years later, the Land of Victorious Socialism effectively liberated labor from payment for it, and, in the same breath, Narco-2 with the host of same institutions covering the boundless USSR became the brilliant realization of the cherished dream of the founders of scientific communism about erasing differences between City and Village.
>
> *Donnerwetter*! Who'd ask for better proof that Ewige Weibliche means business and pedantically does its job?.
>
> Both the Russian Empire and the United States of America abolished slavery in the early '60s of the XIX-nth century, well done! Three cheers for each!.
>
> It's only that Russian mujiks were enslaved many centuries before the first Afro-American slave was ever born.
>
> I mean, old habits are die-hard customers indeed…)

Each person certainly has their own story and if you keep quiet and don't interrupt them by attempts at narrating some of your own, they will eventually tell theirs to you.

Not necessarily about themselves, maybe about a relative or a neighbor. For example, about a German soldier from an infantry squad occupying a village *khutta*. Each morning he yelled something to which his comrades responded with their laughter. One of them had a little Russian and explained to the landlady the content of his yells, "Gimme those two bitches – Hitler and Stalin, I'll give them short shrift with my Schmeisser!"

The story was told me by an old woman preparing to retire from the Construction Shop Floor, who, as a small girl, saw Germans living in her mom's *khutta*.

> (...the question is: for how long they would tolerate such an entertainer in the Red Army?..)

Or about a mujik who made friends with a stranger at a beer bar. They went out together and strolled along the street until the new acquaintance had to loosen his bowels. He dropped in a nearby yard with a promise to be back in a moment. On taking a leak, he tried to nick a carpet from the linen rope and was arrested...

As for the mujik waiting for his gossip on the sidewalk, he got four years of prison as the accomplice. Yes, there still occurred some happenstance mistakes even under the most human judicial system in the world…

And the executioner was simply proud to tell his story because he considered himself a hero, not an executioner.

He served at the front Smersh battalion mopping up the areas taken control of, and whenever they happened to capture an RLA soldier, he personally and heroically took the traitor to a nearby wood. Although at the headquarters there was a special platoon with sub-machine guns for the purpose.

Now, they two would walk there arm in arm, only the hands of one in the pair were tied behind his back. And on the way, the hero began a casual talk about the family and kids, so that some of the captives even started to hope for something.

And then he said, "Why do you, bitch, betrayed our Motherland?" And he shot his TT pistol, not to kill though, but make a hole in the liver with his bullet so that the bastard wriggled for 10 minutes before dying of the lethal wound.

After the war, he wanted to become a diplomat, but they explained to him that a Soviet diplomat, being an embodiment of our Homeland abroad, should be flawless. Unfortunately, his body was missing three fingers cut off by a bomb fragment when already in Germany. How would he waltz another country ambassador's wife at a diplomatic rout with such a claw? He saw the point and entered an institute for economics to get the diploma of a middle-rank manager...

I slightly knew his son who was always ready with slogans like "we'll not allow the bitches to trample our native land!", because he flawlessly memorized and kept to his dad's ideology…

In Konotop, the ideology was hardly ever viewed with much of reverence. When in the heat of an argument, folks did not choose some high-flown words. Thus, for example, to upbraid a female, they would say, "You are a Newsya Kamenetskaya!"

Newsya was a city idiot. She silently walked the sidewalks, no one addressed her and she addressed no one because she was a quiet case. But a single look at her hat was enough to see that she was nuts, sort of a red bonnet with a bouquet of artificial flowers. By that bonnet, she was recognized from afar, and small kids in the street would run after her and shout, " Newsya Kamenetskaya!"

But she did not reply and walked silently on. A casual city idiot. The executioner's son murdered her. Late at night, in the Loony park. He did not want his Homeland to be trampled by quiet idiots. Lyalka had to see the purist off in the grated *stolypin* car from the railway station.

And so as to make sure that the likes of Newsya would never dare anymore infest the sacred sidewalks of Homeland, that son of the Smersh hero...

(...SHUT UP!. Certain things shouldn't ever be told even to grown-up children!..)

I don't know why, but some of the stories are darker than all the thousand and one night put together…

Yet, even in the tragic layouts, you could always find nooks for optimism!

In that winter the frost was reaching absolutes and if walking streets you turned your head too sharply, no matter left or right, some tiny sounds came from inside – they were your thoughts turned to ice and tinkling against the frozen convolution walls within the gray matter.

And smack in the middle of that pole of cold, you came across a broadsheet on the wall in the plant check-entrance, "Those who wish to partake in a ski trip to the Seim, please, apply at the Tourism Group."

Haven't I told it was a very modern and advanced plant? In the basement of one of the five-story apartment blocks in Plant Neighborhood, I was once making the screed for the rubber covering of a mini football stadium…

I found the Tourism Group's room. They told me: on Saturday, at the check-entrance, with own skis. I brought my skis, the ones I was running in the forest at the Object.

A small PAZ bus at the check-entrance waited for those who did not feel like skiing that morning. Nonetheless, there were 3 volunteers to ski all the 12 kilometers; some girl with a guy courting her, and I. The ski-track in the deep snow was being made in turn.

But what a beauty! Especially when we entered the forest. Because of the frost, the snow became as fine as flour and the sun was setting ablaze each and every of those tiny crystals...

The other two skiers knew the location of the plant recreation camp, but I saw it for the first time. The houses made of timber had steep gable roofs, like in the Swiss Alps. The whole forest around drowned in the snow and only the roofs stuck out because of their steepness. Classy view! My room was just under the roof and from inside I could once more admire how steep it was.

The roommate turned out one of the veteran tourists, not a rookie like me. As I understood, their group was sort of a closed shop at the plant, and the advertisement was just to show to the Management that they were active in attracting the working masses. They did not ever expect there would turn up a curious yokel of me...

On the other hand, the bozo got a fresh listener for his stories about their hiking in the Urals where all week long they walked in the rain. From morning till night. Yet afterward, at every outing that he was taking part in, there was not even a drizzle. That's why in the Tourism Group they nicknamed him "dry talisman". Whenever they ventured without him, they got drenched by the rain and quite the opposite with his participation.

Then he left and returned with a bottle of the medicine alcohol of which he poured me a full cup before measuring out twenty drops for himself. We drank and had a snack sharing the sandwich brought by him. Soon he left again and did not return, and from the first floor there came the sounds of music.

Fully aware that free medicine alcohol was a means to switch me off so that I did not mess around with the group's cultural program, I lay down on the bed. However, I noticed that the steep roof was in the state of too active swaying, and for that reason, I got up and went downstairs.

They were having a quick dance in the hall with the lights turned off and only colored lamps were blinking rhythmically. I also hopped for a while in their wide circle. Then I moved to the next room. It was lit brightly and along the walls there sat ladies of non-skiing age, probably, the tourists' mothers from the bus.

In the center, there stood a six-pocket billiards table. Dry Talisman was fooling around with rolling the smooth balls before the mothers. He was surprised to see me up but submitted the cue to me when I asked.

Believe it or not, but with just 3 biting strikes, I send 3 different balls into the pockets. Even I myself got stunned because I never was anything but a flounder at billiards. I stopped at that, returned the cue and went out into the yard.

The darkness outside was as dark as in the middle of the forest mingled with the light from the windows and high fire in the barbecue box to make coals for the meat processing. And not a single alive soul was around...

I went up to the fire, looked at the flames and felt blues – everyone was like everyone else and only I was such a slice, forlorn and clearly cut-off. And those blues drove my intoxication away, I went up into the room and fell asleep because of grief…

~ ~ ~

March 8 another red-letter day in the tear-off calendar on your wall, however, it is not a totalitarian holiday. The Day of Spring, the Day of Beauty, the International Women’s Day. Absence of the all-out demonstration saves me a day-long non-stop marching along the vicious circle. Instead, I snugly land at an out-of-the-way table in a kinda detached pub among the blocks of Motor Detail Plant sleeping area. The place is roomy and murky because of the incessant rain outside whose cats and dogs kept festive minded folks home. We’re not numerous yet high-spirited here. In some 10 meters from my unobtrusive table, a company of 8 merrymakers proportionately male-femaled about the long central table on the premises collectively resent yesterday’s TV *Morning Post* show, a couple of veteran drag queens congratulating each other on the holiday and a 10-year-old pop hit by Leshchenko to all of the fair sex on behalf of all of us, ugly but manly... and equally dull football match today at 5 on channel 2, street teams from League B... Well, and already mentioned me in the corner, certified notoriety, imbalanced and fully unconcerned about their problems with our Central TV. Which is not to say that I am an

absolutely care-free individual, yet my problem is more of down-to-earth nature. Being an optimist, I firmly believe that my problem will certainly find its solution, with my help. Namely, how to snack liquid with liquid.

When I came here—and I was the first!—to demonstrate that I was a peace-loving redskin and to emphasize the fact that it's my maiden visit to the establishment, I made a try at buying a boiled egg from the glazed sarcophagus under the counter. The bartender rejected outright and never gave in, too human paleface. Seems like he remembered me as a part to the Orpheuses. Zop they handled him at those times or, maybe, Zots. Never any close to remember. So I let him play a kind host caring for my priceless health. For which reason there remained nothing to choose from but good ol' Zhigulevskoye beer, still better than nothing at all.

The company followed after the fruitless trade negotiations were over. Mr. Barmen, does not have much to do today, the young working class couples appeared bringing their refreshment by them. Being natives in this blocks, they know by heart the assortment in the glazed showcase under kinda marbled counter. A month of exposure turned the items for sale into theatrical dummies, bullet-proof waffles, patties for driving nails or derailing trains, depends on your walk in life. So they openly smuggled in hooch and 3 torbas of, supposedly, home-made snacks. I'm too polite to gaze and check but lard is there, betcha. In 5 minutes they were assuring each other already, in turn, it's the best party in their lifespan.

– Wow, guys! Six minutes already! We're sitting in a grand style indeed!

I have this whole table to myself, no one to share my admiration at the mighty rain whose gushing curly streams double the thickness of glass in the walls, splash-whip the concrete outside. Pouring beer onto beer inside, even if somewhat monotonous, still goes on, we're champions for solidarity, Bro.

I tolerantly let their celebration ooze into the arch of my ear. Just for the record, in what time they seconded me? No use asking Zotz or Zop who milks them for more kopecks than for the beer that I'll consume… even though I could buy, after all, that pensioner of an egg. Yes, I could. Potentially. Anyway, he's a good boy this here Zotz (or Zop?), potentially. Still hoards an egg or 2. A bit uneducated, doesn't watch Travelers' Club on the Central TV. In China, for instance, wise eaters scramble for 50-year-old eggs, gourmet's delight, they see them by color, each decade makes eggs bluer and bluer… Tell me how blue are your...

As always when not having anything potentially good to do, I pick up that same old shoe to chew on under the jingle-splash-claps of our turnkey rain. 10 of us, 4 pairs, pretty soaked already, Zots-or-Zop plus me… no, no, we're straight, I recalled now, he's married. Anyway, we're here to have a good time, to make the day red despite of anything. Or how?

So now, dear Sir, what time are you talking about? Have you ever seen any? I don't mean clockfaces and other props to this endless sham. All we have here now are these innocent folks, deceived, exploited, and ZopZots over his rotten glazed balls, though possibly not too much, and me in the same space. All we ever have is space and space alone. Well, yes, and this eternal fraud we're fed, inoculated, wrapped into, from womb to tomb, this ever present Time. You have

to annul it to be free. Send it plank-walking… Now, look around, see any change? Surely not! Subtraction of nothing changes nothing… Of course, it will take some time… Fuck!. It'll take certain efforts to get accustomed to the new world freed from the Biggest Lokhotron Ever. Kiss good-bye your speedometers, chimes, half of the physical formulas, engineering colleges... no mixed tenses whatsoever, no Olympic Games except for, maybe, gymnastics and ice-dancing… it feels scary, Bro… the freedom, the merciless clearance… voidy… no thinkable civilization without underlying Lie… forget of when, there is only where...but wait-wait-wait, you can't get anywhere without multiplication of speed and time… you won't last long in the free world…

State Servants (SS) vs. Sehrguey Ogoltsoff (SO)

SO, the defendant, on March 8, this year, in a state of … inebriety demanded of Bartender at the Rip-Randevous blue eggs, the bluer, the better. In the issuing altercation… later, already on the ruins of the demolished bar sang a subversive chant (resembling the Krishnaits' one), obviously made on the fly "China! China! Uber alles! China! China! Rule the seas!"

—Do you admit perpetuating the aforesaid wrongdoings?

—Who? Whom? How hard? Into which...

Whoa, man! You better stop it now, it's not the Red Army Day…

– Wow! Eleven minutes! We're sitting in a great style! I swear!

~ ~ ~

And the following summer I discovered the existence of capitalized Game. The revelation happened at a football match of the plant team and a visiting one played at the "Avangard" stadium in the Central Park of Recreation. The event attracted an audience of about 20 cut-off slices, like me, who hadn't a f-f..er..I mean, frolic to do, and a couple of random drunks.

So, the teams jogged out to the center, the handshake, referee, tossed coin, all as usual. Then they started the game, sort of. But what could you expect, eh? Factory teams, their trade-union committees bought them trunks and leggings, but no outfit would disguise the fact that mujiks were far over their thirties. If some 15 years before, a couple of them attended the Youth Sports School volleyball section, than that's all their training. And the field's a fairly big one – the standard field for playing soccer. After a dogtrot from end to end, the poor bugger turns a sore sight with his tongue hanging out down his backbone, over the shoulder. You couldn't but feel pity for the geezer. Yet, since I came to the match I sat there, what's the difference when you don't have a.. a-anything else to do. No use of carping.

And suddenly the tall Poplars in the dense row behind the empty opposite stands stirred and rustled… Like, the breath of some invisible giant puffed at them. However, all that became at once unimportant because in the field, quite of a sudden, there was unfolding such a game for which you were all leaning forward, clutching the planks of the bench under you, and turning your head from side to side to follow the ball rocketing over the field, dissecting the air in its flight like a white cannonball which was not allowed to ever touch the ground. Midfielder soared up a half-meter above his own height to pass the ball to the right striker who, one-touch, sent it to the center. The center striker cleverly caught the pass, kicked the ball over the defender, easily bypassed him and – what a mighty strike!. Wow!. No way to guess from where and how he popped up, but the left midfielder intercepted the ball and sent it back far away to the center of the field where at once they kick up a skirmish to get it...

We watched spell-bound closely following the ricochets of the ball from one team to another, getting accelerated by each hit of a leg, or a head, or a chest... It was not them who played the game, it was the game who played them. It was Game.

Finally, even the drunks realized that something unprecedented was happening in the field. They roared and whistled like a 100 000 crowd went mad in the stands... Probably, that shooed off the invisible. The players, one by one, began to shrink and shirk and soon they just jogged around in their soaked thru T-shirts... I am not too much of a football fan, yet now I am convinced that there is real Game in existence.

> (...five minutes of Game, is it not enough? Fans of renown clubs might have seen more, but in bits, not at a stretch, poor homeopaths.
>
> Yes, that Game was gone, dissolved, raced away like a hasty gust of wind, like a bursting drop of happiness, yet it was there and it still fascinates me...)

The reason for my taciturnity was that I kept my tongue sealed up... At first, I let it enjoy all the freedom of speech it wanted, but a month after my getting a job there was a general meeting of the Construction Shop Floor workmen attended by a representative of the "Motordetail" Management.

There was an unmistakable air of a leader about that block of a representative. You just couldn't imagine such an individual as a child with a balloon, or a youth frustrated about his pimples. Oh, no! He came from his mother's womb ready-made, just like that – half-bold, wearing glasses, with hanging stomach and the well-bred stateliness... In his speech at the meeting, he outlined the tasks facing us in the currently crucial period of the Acceleration. It was time for everyone to work harder at their workplaces, both we, the workmen at different construction sites and they, the Management, at their posts, steering our engagement and activities to achieve the set goals.

He finished and the meeting's chairman asked if there were any questions. I raised my hand.

> (...it was a breach of the tacit rules, by which the question about questions was closing any meeting. However, I raised my hand because he really put my back up that nightingale from the plant Management...)

I asked to explain the difference between the "engagement" and "activities" I was really curious. Thank you.

The Management representative whispered something to the meeting's chairman and the latter announced the meeting closed. The participants, with relief, hurried to their homes.

A couple of days later a guy from the village of Bochky, who was coming to work by motorcycle, entered the locker room with his round biker helmet squeezed under his oxter, like an astronaut at the launch pad, and announced his intention to change the lock in his locker because of schizophrenics walking about the room. He addressed no one in particular, but the wide locker room grew silent, mujiks stopped donning their *spetzovkas*, dropped the start of-the-day exchanges and turned their faces in my directions, a kinda wait-in-the-hushed-expectancy, you know. That's why I started keeping my tongue on a short leash.

> (...you can't kick against so mighty levers of power with their arsenal of tacit regulations, elusive omnipresence, and superb pedagogical skills – they even managed to teach the "schizophrenic" word to a moron from Bochky...)

~ ~ ~

"You been to Romny?" Here, in the showers room of the Konotop bathhouse filled with clouds of steam, the noise of water rushing from taps, the clank of tin basins against marble tops of low tables, each of us looked like an "irrevocably free" from the Area of the fifth unit in the regional psychiatric hospital.

"Though having that experience, I still can't recollect you." Even I myself admired the impeccability of the poetic rhythm in my answer. The neighbors stopped rubbing soap in their respective sponges and, pricking up their ears in attention, moved closer – the Konotopers are marked by their innate propensity for poetry.

I kept staring at the inquirer. The accordion groans over the evening Area... it's getting dark... soon to go up for the night... these eyes... same eyes only without the oily blueness over the irises... "Volodya!"

The neighbors pulled back, some of them grabbing the tin basins moved over to other tables. I love the Konotopers' polite understanding, they never want to be in the way of intimate developments...

How could I not recognize him right away? One of my partners in our trinity sharing 2 beds; he smiles bashfully. The absence of that quirk in his eye put me off track at first...

> (...it's not the glassy-eyedness, it's just like a translucent film swimming over the iris, and later exactly the same steely-bluish veil I saw about the eyes of people in the Azeri village of Krkchyan who arrested me on a *toomb* slope, taking for an Armenian spy though I was just picking blackberry there, aka mosh, aka ozhina, because it was a Sunday...)

By the official version, the Karabakh war lasted for three years, 1992 – 1994, but, in fact, it started much earlier and hasn't ended yet... On the third (in the unofficial estimation) year of the war, when I stopped to like the expression in Sahtic's eyes, I attempted at evacuating her from the theater of war. By a strange coincidence she, together with Ahshaut and Ruzanna, got to 13 Decemberists, Konotop.

Can you imagine my surprise 3 months later when she appalled me with her coming back together with the kids? Anyway, you surely can't imagine the facial expression of the RMK Supreme Council's cashier when she was handing me my 2 monthly salaries in advance, as ordered. 600 of Soviet rubles, the devaluated currency of non-existent state, the sum though was enough for me to cut and run from the war zone. That's why her countenance reflected both disdain and envy, it's hard to say of which there was more... I had to fly to Yerevan to meet the repatriates at Zvartnots airport for the subsequent airlift from the airport of Erebuni equipped with a heliport, also by a chopper fetching a barrel of diesel fuel and another group of *fedayee* fighters to Stepanakert.

> (...on their arrival day the city had not yet recovered from the shock caused by the death of 25 people killed by a single "Grad" volley...)

Unfamiliar people in Yerevan, learning where we were going to, suggested to at least leave the children, Ahshaut and Ruzanna (in alphabetical order), by them...

When we got to the apartment in Stepanakert which our friends were renting to us for free, I asked about the reason for so quick a return. "I realized that living just so as to live was not worth the while."

Here is a bright example of the unavoidable influence of environmental effects. Take an Armenian woman, brought up in all the strictness of patriarchal-matriarchal way of life, let her live for 3 months in Konotop and she will come back without even asking for permission but philosophizing already, giving out darn wise maxims. Hello! Here you are and sign this receipt, please...

But couldn't that Konotop-acquired wisdom get it that fearing for just yourself is easier to endure than that same amount of fear plus for those who you love? Especially when the air alarm sirens start their wailing, or from the toomb of Camel Back thunder the naval guns brought there from the Caspian flotilla? Not mentioning "Grad" missiles that make no noise at all when on the fly to their final din-bang-crush, and half the block is wiped off. After all, we live in the age of high technologies, you know.

> (...and again I got washed off somewhere else...
>
> I was talking about Romny, right? But a madhouse and war are two big differences.
>
> Or are they?..)

All this is to elucidate the fact that I somehow did not have much spare time to update Sahtic as to certain facts in my previous biography, being busy with waiting for a suitable moment. Though her unawareness was not entirely my fault. Had Sahtic asked a direct question, like, "How many times did they lock you up in a madhouse?" then, as a well-trained supporter of righteousness and, generally, man of principle, I would give a direct exhaustive answer. (It's noteworthy, that handling me is a fairly straightforward and intuitive job.)

Now, because of all that I was curious, to certain extent, what information could she scoop up there during the evacuation period?

None, as a matter of fact. The Konotopers did not rat on their own. The only puncture happened in a conversation with a fellow employee. (Sahtic even got a job at the KEMZ plant when in the evacuation.) Her gossip, having learned that Sahtic's husband was named Ogoltsoff, said only, "Hmm..."

And that comment, I reckon, exhausts the denigration of my personality leaked to the Transcaucasia from Konotop sources…

~ ~ ~

(...the game of 'knifelets' starts as a kiddie fun, yet it goes on all over your lifespan and even from a generation to generation. It's only that among adults the game acquires a longer name, Securing of Interests, however, remains as fascinating and brings in play lots other playthings besides a primitive knife blade. Consider the following example, if you please.

At the initial, small-fry stage of 'knifelets' the player Russia (further in the example named 'R1') lost some part of its 'earth' sector to the players Armenia and Azerbaijan (further on, 'A1' and 'A2') because the USSR broke into parts (you can't avoid sharp downs and outs in so a dynamic game).

A1 and A2 go on unskilled stabbing at the territorial integrity of each other while R1 goes over to the next level in Securing of Interests and assumes the peace-keeper attitude in the eager contest of two A's. As a result, the conflict between A1 and A2 flourishes for 3 (as of yet) decades and very beneficially for R1. To see how a peace-keeper can by Securing of Interests make profit on war, one should watch it from the book-keeping angle. For a starter, let's try some finger-counting. Suppose that army of each side to the conflict comprises 200 000 servicemen. (Sure enough, none of the A's' General Staffs reports me the quantity of their armed forces, yet adding up the military clerks and other suchlike *chmo* the numbers would be way higher. Still and all a manly man keeps to his word, if it was said 200 let it remain 200: keep the change!)

Now, every serviceman wears army boots. For the sake of calculus simplicity, imagine that all the warriors, from privates to generals, put on the same, cheapest, 'kirza' boots for $12 a pair. The footwear is worth its price and serves for 2 years (The artificial leather plant named after Kirov always was a reputed producer), thus, one year of the

conflict secures peace-keepers' revenue for $ 120 000 by ‘kirza’ alone. But camouflage pants, Velcroed jackets, pea-jackets, belts, helmets?! But Kalashnikov assault-rifles, machine-guns, mortars, artillery, both ground and anti-aircraft?! But the ammo for all of the mentioned and still upcoming equipment?! But military trucks, armor vehicles, tanks?! But the land mines, anti-personnel as well as anti-tank ones?! But choppers, jets, radar and missile installations, night-vision devices?! But… (nearing the third decade of the conflict it dawned even on Jews in Israel what a bonanza it is here and they started to supply drones.)

I am running out of my fingers but we haven’t yet reached the military advisers who help each of the A sides to master the delivered weaponry. They also have to be paid for. In full... As they used to say in the besieged Stepanakert in the winter of 1991-92, ‘The Armenians pay Russians to shoot their artillery while the Turks (in Karabakh, Azeries are handled ‘Turks’ for some reason) pay Russians to miss the target’. Which is a jest, of course, because the military advisers never miss when Securing of Interests demands it. So it was in Khojaloo, so it was in Horadiz – the two key moments that did not allow the conflict to untimely die out. That’s the essence of Securing of Interests on the international arena, stick to it and keep it on.

However, the game is so engaging that it goes on at the internal level as well. Let’s take, for instance, R1. One calls it ‘Russia-Mommy’, another one handles it ‘Russastan’, the popular Lubea band sings ‘Russeaaa!’, I call it Russia but all those discrepancies converge in the same mujik who after his working day throws the earned money in with his pals to buy vodka and gulp it from the bottle’s neck and then he comes home to give his kids a stinging example of a reprimand, fuck you, fucking motherfuckers! Then fucking batters his fucking wife for speaking up fucking too much and falls asleep on the floor next to the cooled away Russian oven covering himself with his padded jacket while his petty Czar soigne gives out bon mots from the TV box above his sleeping head. And that’s the way it should be because State is a multi-functional community of people where each person performs their function. Someone is to make decisions which interests should be secured and in what way, another one executes those decisions, still other glorifies in his carols the decision maker and its executors and so on and so forth because I have no fingers enough for each and every one down to this very mujik who’s snoring now on the floor under his padded jacket and is nothing of a functionary but the material for the internal Securing of Interests.

Now, he’s given up his day pay to the treasury exchanging it for vodka distilled from the mixture of sawdust and oil byproducts and later he’ll give up his son so that they format the boy into a law enforcer who will Secure the Interests against his dad and other mujiks. The sleeper’s daughter will, of her own will, choose the career of a prostitute because someone should entertain the other functionaries in the society at their leisure time.

The hardest lot, of course, is that by those from the highest functional layer. Besides Securing the Interests in the outer and internal space, they have to think about their own interests too and that’s where they can’t allow themselves any slacking. Constant

alertness and readiness for anything is the pledge of success. Here 'anything' means anything at all – to kill, to betray, to give in, and to lie under (not only metaphorically) … Securing of Interests demands utter dedication.

People! Humans! Countrymen! Do we really need all that?! What do we gain? Power, money, glorification? Be vigilant, O, neighbors, don't get hooked with that petty scam! Power-money-glory are nothing but a means and not the aim for a sober-headed member to a human society. No! Our aim is the purest, unalloyed envy. Envy from the rest of society members is all we need. That's the apogee, acme and climax of human existence. Mere survival is not the goal for a Robinson Crusoe, what he really needs is finding an envious man Friday. Because neither nanny-goats no billy-goats can stimulate a normal individual. That's where lies the foundation corner stone to uphold the working model of the human society. Perpetuum Mobile, with your kind permission, checked by the uncountable millennia of usage. At one pole of the society vertical there is Slave in a state of eternal inebriety while at the opposite pole we see Pharaoh – same shit of an animal only Rollex-ornated…

But why have I slid to expressing myself in such an evasively streamlined manner? Am I afraid to unequivocally disclose the scumbags' identity? Well, firstly, I'd rather avoid soiling my letter with the sewage stinkers' names and, secondly, I'm far from being sure that Listiev, Mkrtchan, Nemtsoff, Sargsian and countless other executed from behind a corner would not start playing Securing the Interests the same shitty way were they to reach the higher levels in the game itself which is so f..er..yes! fucking addictive. You start to feel yourself kinda Almighty, you start to change the rules and draw new laws… Well, not the laws of Physics, or, say, Biology, like, enhancing longevity, juvenilation and stuff… But the works in that direction are underway, yes…

In short, under the current situation in the world, devaluation of information by means of the Internet, there's no sense in censorship and strict ideology control. Okay, let's say I'm pouring out the most subversive stuff, so what? (I can't do that at Facebook or any other popular social net, they purge such things out automatically) About my indie site on the Internet there are millions buzzing Emelyas, each one in their style, I'm buried by evergrowing avalanche of advice on the best practices in fucking, making pizza, enjoying Tick-Tock, buying Perpetuum Mobile for just $49. That's why I'm not afraid of telling what I know.

And then again, if talking about cowardice, here we all are on the same ground. Let's take me, for instance, I do know that Algerian Bay has a bump on his nose but keep myself in check and don't blare about it from the roof-tops. Because you never know when they gonna pop up and fix you with pissed thru pieces of a torn bedsheet…)

~ ~ ~

Yes, life kept rolling along the same rails, where there was the bath, and the beach, and calls from Twoic. And everywhere I acted my rolled-in role, but somehow I got already split from everything, both from the systematically adjusted way of life and from my part in it. I kinda

turned that mujik who, leaning against the fenced bounds of the playing grounds, like, watches the kids messing around in the sandbox... Everyone was busily busy with their business in that sand, and Twoic, and bosses, and helpers, and I myself with my streamlined lifestyle, yet I did not really care about all that fuss…

In spring, Twoic proposed to visit Nezhyn for, like, to kick up a party in the old school style at the Hosty. I remember that it was definitely Thursday, my bath day and, apparently, the eve of some holiday, he would not call me in the middle of the week. So I took a towel and underwear for change and went to Nezhyn because even though there was no steam room in the hostel, yet the shower could still be used...

In the hostel lobby, auntie Dina was sitting on duty, she had not changed a single bit and, of course, she didn't let me go any farther. I asked a passer-by student to check the room where, as arranged, Twoic had already been waiting for me to show up, and tell him about the predicament. He went upstairs and I had a discovery.

A young student entered the lobby from the hostel corridor, wearing a crumpled dressing-gown and a sleepy indifferent face. She did not give me the slightest look, ignoring another of casual visitors who pop up in the hostel lobby, and just came over to the window... I waited for Twoic or a message from him about thru which of the back side windows on the first floor I could climb in. So I was not at all prepared that my body, getting no order from me, nor any permission, would unexpectedly throw my right hand up and behind my head, so that my elbow stick out in the air. What a cheeky kink! Was it triggered by the nearness of the common-looking girl with her face of not so well-kneaded dough? Or was it her crumpled dressing gown to turn me on and out of control? In any case, it was outrageous, moreover without any distinct need! That body of mine got really too far! I, for my part, did not intend no gestures... And the cause of the mutiny aboard, a couple of meters off me, was staring at the absolutely void landscape of the two-story canteen behind the gray glass in the window. Some shocking discovery...

The messenger returned and said the door of the indicated room was locked. Apparently, Twoic had already begun a shake-up in the old-days-style of some complaisant chick... I went out of the hostel. To be back in Konotop before the bath closing hour was just unthinkable. But it was a Thursday! Okay, there remained the lake in the Count's Park, I headed there the shortest way.

A group of student lads in their sportswear were coming up along the same shortcut from the park. They reached the pipe from which Fyodor and Yakov once flopped into the water, yet now there was no water anymore, and the moat turned into a wide sod grown ditch. One of them crossed it walking along the shaky pipe. Wow! It seemed to become a student tradition here!

So what? Drumming myself in the chest and shouting "It's me! I'm the legend! It's been started by me!"?. In the sad, elegiac mood I entered the alley of Elms and strolled to the narrower end of the lake by the thicket in the deserted parts of the park. There I undressed and in the altogether entered the water.

Having rubbed the soap all over myself, I threw it ashore and scrubbed the hand-reachable parts of my body. Then, to wash the foam off, I churned along a little, turning around in a screw-wise

twirl before diving back towards the shore. White spits of foam scattered the black ripples. The birth of Aphrodite. The f-f..er..frivolous Little Mermaid, thought I rubbing myself with the towel... No, I'm not a pervert. It simply gets so, somehow all by itself, and then just rolls on in a progressive spiral-wise rotation…

~ ~ ~

Lenochka entered the sewing college in the Sumy city and went to study there. I did not have any reason to go on living at 13 Decemberists, and found a place on the opposite outskirts of Konotop, closer to the "Motordetail" plant.

It was a summer kitchenette of 2 × 3 meters with a pretty low ceiling, in the yard of a *khutta* whose owner worked at the wastewater treatment plant, where I once laid individual walls. The kitchenette's brick stove left room only for a bed and a desk by the window, yet it was enough for me to shack up with a couple of books in German and The German-Russian Dictionary of Medical Terms because no other kind of a dictionary in the target language happened on the shelves in the bookstore on Lenin Street. The rent was only 15 rubles but, nevertheless, I finally stopped sending out the already irregular alimony transfers in 2 directions...

The extended interest in German was brought about by training up for the final showdown with that old good Freud. As an attested schizophrenic possessing a considerable store of experience in the field studies, I did not see any plausible reason for his fixation on the symbolism of genitals. Well, yes, a cigar may have penis' looks while an ashtray may be persistently associated with vagina and so on and so forth. But then, what of that? They got transfixed by those interpretations and stuck with no more progress than a stick in the mud.

So I finally consolidated my belief that Freud, in fact, is a storyteller, like, say, Hans Christian Andersen, they differ from each other only by the choice of words they used. Thus, Freud divides the Kingdom of consciousness into four parts (a good fellow Sigmund, that was a step forward from the Hegel's triads):

the Duchy Consciousness;

the March Subconscious;

the Baronetcy Ego; and

the County Super-Ego.

Ah! How nice and pretty! They're so delightfully poetic, them those fairy tales! Thank you, Uncle Ziggy!

Anyone has the right to a scientific theory of their own, however, theories are checked by their application in real life situations. Propped by the theory of personal concoction, Freud cured 12 percent of his patients. And although they might've recovered on their own accord or else got healed by the cruelest, yet most efficient therapist of all – Mr. Time, we'll still will give them to

Freud awarding for his merits – he offered at least some foothold, a gaudy oasis, when the subject in question was as bare and empty as the arid desert, which endeavor put the inventor on the map.

Besides, he still inspires slews of artists to portray their individual vision of adventurous cocks and charming fannies in all sorts of disguise and juxtaposition…

Yet, leaving the grounds of the visual Art and turning to my personal case, what cured me?

Cured? Whoa! Slow down! Easy, boy, easy… To be cured, you should get ill first, but was I? Where are the indications?

All my life went without the slightest deviation following, straight as beeline, the blue print from *The Bhagavad-Gita*. Baby—kid—youth—man—old man, you know. The crazy summer '79...hmm...nah, I won't start a clash about terms... though it is their word against mine: beautiful or crazy – tastes differ... Now, even that period was in precise keeping to normality, one of the necessary stages in the spiritual development as expostulated by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit,* the stage of "youthful folly" awaiting any normal man in his development was, in my case, a bit acuter and delayed for 10 years, that's all. But even the postponement was not my fault, I was too busy for follies in the conventional period, marriage, army and stuff, you know.

But then, what's normal? wearing a modish necktie and well-pressed parade-crap when loading a pistol for the suicide?

All my abnormalities are well contained within my dreams. Yes, I hear voices in my dreams, I will not conceal. I'm sleeping, and they read to me—in an impersonal and distanced tone of voice—pieces of prose. I must admit, rather enviable passages of neatly composed and glibly flowing prose they are, somehow resembling a movie screenplay. From time to time the reading voice gets substituted by visual action illustrations, yet when there's a change in the story-line, it pops up back and starts to mumble again.

I'd rather turn them those voices off, not because of being envious, it's just that they interfere with my sleep, but I don't know where's their switch control…

Yet, all that is minor inconveniences when compared to the sheer horror of "Sisyphus' Reiterations". By its monstrosity, such reiterations are on a par with the ever switched on bulb above your head to remind that you're shut in a madhouse only they are directed the other way, not from outside. In the course of such SRs you find yourself in the reality which you've lived thru already and because they reiterate themselves, maybe, more than once. Your state though is always the same, ineluctable as weightlessness when orbiting the planet—you are suppressed by a dreary dismay and urges to cry only nothing comes out like from a tube twisted out dry of the last drops—circling in sticky necessity to live anew some stretch in your life which you naively considered left behind but no! All around you flows the same yet already estranged life because you are not that former "I" any more. Graying, brow-wrinkled ignoramus, you're roaming familiar labyrinth of the hostel and auditoriums to get the lousy diploma you don't even need but it will save you staying there for another circle in a row… or you're sitting just like right now on

the brown hard stool in the mire of dirty-green lino between the plywood walls beneath the fluorescent tubes, the iron of siderails in the bank bed prop your back and not a single familiar face, your buddies since long demobbed and these around are here to keep me for one more cycle or even dump to stockade.

— Look here, 'suckers. Put off whatever you're jerking in your brains right now. It's Political Study Class here. Today's topic is the Corporate Imperialism. Clear, 'suckers?

— Aye-yup! Comrade! Leftenant! Col'nel!

— Good… off we go. You keep a-showing me your ram optics now and think, if only you can at all, OK , Col'nel, push forth your shit. You think—if only you have what to do the trick with—that everything goes on just as it goes without a plan, direction and stuff and here you're fucking wrong, as always. Because every-fucking-thing one way or another clicks and tags on some other this or that thing and if you can't see how all the thingamabob hooks on and in and out it's what we have Political Study Classes in the army for. Fuck… Hey, you, sitting over there by the last *koobrik* with that your brazen visage. Which draft? '73?… A-ha! Sumy, *khokhols*. You think that '73 is a bolide fucked year 'cause that's when they raked you up to do your hitch and you don't get it in any way that in that same year in behind-the-hill they pressed out the Thomas Pynchon's book about Gravity's Rainbow and while you, numskulls, don't even know such words they, over there, pulled it off.

In short, the book is about Them. By Thomas, They are almost immortal, invisible, dwell on the other Side and never lose. And that's all what he leaked about Them in about 800 pages but you, 'suckers, should know the book turned out as good as a fucking eager slut, you read it and want more and more...Who mumbled "a behind-the-hill paranoid fool-driver"? Wanna get rotten with fatigues till your last day in the hitch? The masters of Pynchon's caliber are not the stuff to call in question you have to only check out their handwork and draw your illiterate conclusions. Like about those ballet dancers by Degas which he was drawing till got blind. When they watched the dancers' skirts long enough and at the right angle, they discovered a whole heap of benzolidol rings of the most cool synthetics because everything click-hook-tags in and out it's only that you have to know the right dosage to get touched the right way… check out the root! And you'll see even more than that. OK, it's not Chemistry break in classes for you here, so now we'll pull Them out in the clear in a politically refined way.

We'll start ab ovo… Stop scratching your balls, mudaks, in Latin it means "from the very beginning". Everything's started from a fresh leaf after a big washing. The flotsam Noah had 3 sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In regard of his Dad, Ham once behaved as a mean cad and Shem started reasoning that it's not right. Yet Japheth didn't waste words, came up and knocked Ham out. Noah watched all that bedlam and he sez, "Shut up you all! Listen to me only!" However, Dad was not for ever and ever and after his R.I.P. someone still had to maintain the order that's where from originated the byword "Dad is dead! Long live Dad!". Noah's successor was named State as all his next in line and so as not to fumble with the in-family handles he just classified them all. Japheth and his heirs became Class 1, aristocrats thanks to the timely punch, Shem who sold himself for being so conversed in morals secured Class 2 for his descendants,

Ham and his litter became plowmen. D'you follow? In the beginning, *ab ovo*, there were 3 Classes and 1 State, one for all. That's where class struggle takes its roots from.

Gradually, little by little, there sprung out towns too whose populace gemmated from plowmen and became a separate class of town-dwellers named bourgeois, excuse my French. And town slickers are sworn swindlers, you know and, as always, they fucked up country hicks and became Class 3, pushing plowmen into Class 4. Now, we have 4 classes but that's not for long because there hatched up already Class 5 in those towns-cities who also were drudgers like plowmen but not on land already. For the sake of shortness, they were named proletarians. Ha! They are 5 now! Get lost? Look at you hand, how many fingers? Which is also why you're here, non-combatant pricks...

So, the classes live on while learning the methods of class struggle. Each one has its place and function under State: Japhethoviches fight, Hamoviches plow, Shemoviches… well, morale check-ups and connection to Almighty is their responsibility, when not busy with the capital problem – how to proliferate under celibacy? Proletarians work, work hard, though without conveyor yet. Bourgeois, those town sons of a gun, who jumped the queue to become Class 3, open factories and look for sales markets both locally and overseas….

The workload grows vertically and horizontally, State gets it there's the need for an additional, the most necessary for State, class of managers and clerks. Class 6 do not produce, discover or invent anything, no, they are in charge of dividing and distributing of what was produced, discovered or invented. Now, how many classes do we have? How many fingers in your hand? So add to them the offshoot your fingers grab at each day more than once.

Now, leave them Classes alone… Let's turn to State. The critter's not too complicated, it can be, basically, one of 2 sorts, either concentrated on keeping the innards in good order or trying to expand its order, as is, beyond its limits up to becoming the owner of the known world. This inflation aiming at world domination turns State into Imperialistic State which does not have fail-back. Empire does not control itself, it just fulfills its designation, without the growth it gets busted – either devoured by the outside critters of the like feather or burst from inside because of unwisely swallowed fodder… Besides, State might have to live thru revolutions, which are periods when the ruling Class hands over its prerogatives to another Class as it happened, for instance, in France.

At first, State there was ruled by Class 1, as the most belligerent of classes, they were not clever enough for anything else besides warring which trade narrows you outlook. Yet, they were fans of dynasty games, liked the glitter of dangling trifles in their tunics, and between the battles got toned up by hopping in minuets. That way minueted themselves to guillotine. "Monsieur Executioner, so this is the Apparatus? Wow, what mighty looks! So I put my head thru this hole? Wow, wha…", CLANGGZZ!!... That's how the bourgeoisie of Class 3, came to power in France. (Not that aristocrats there were zapped completely as a class, you still can come across of some, in guarded preserves.)

All the French classes were there and the last, Class 6, draw certain conclusions from that History lesson. If you are a class, they can apply to you the class approach with all subsequent

repercussions. That's why they are so adamantly against being counted for a class, no, no! They are just State attributes, humble officiaries, they are public servants, PS. (Don't mix with state servants (SS) which role is done by military and other beetle-brow SS-men.) And this way, the class, like, exists but it has no actuality. Here is invisibility for you! What's next in the list? Being on the other Side? Easy! All those PS arrive in the invisible class of distributors of produced goods and weal coming down/up from the rest 5 classes and leave them on the other Side of invisibility, become aliens to the classes of their origin, extraneous to each other. Whichever way you turn it, they are always from another Side… Never lose? As if anyone can doubt it. They are Distributors, They control the card deck, you enter the casino and They already know what hand you'll have at Blackjack...

The other matter our Thomas Pynchon is good at is his discourse of Corporate Imperialism. Which means, nowadays Empires are built not on the territorial-national basis but according to association with the right branch of business. Again the bullseye! What is his dope I wonder? Just from pure curiosity, eh? If you consider, for example, all those oil and drug cartels or, taking a step back, the Russian Empire. I be damned if there's not one-to-one correspondence...

Almost half of its Imperial standing, Russia managed to avoid revolutions. Yes, riots, pretenders, peasant wars took place, as anywhere, yet only after the French Revolution the revolutionary virus expanded globally penetrating not only politics but other areas as well, hence industrial revolution, sexual revolution, revolution of… well let it wait till next Political Study Classes.

The germination of revolutionary activities in Russia is dated as early as 1825. Russian military who visited France in the course of the international campaign to rout the Napoleonic Empire got exposed there to the contemporary revolutionary virus. On the return to their unsuspecting Homeland, they started arrange revolutionary parties – to play cards, drink wine, and recollect those whores from Mullen Rouge. «They know how enjoy their lives there! Eh, bro?—Yea, bro. —And here, bro?—Green blues, bro.—Ew! Rassea-a..."

And suddenly, as if responding to an online order, the Emperor kicked the bucket on the Azov sea shores, an unmistakable revolutionary situation. The infection mixed with hangover, abusing their status of SS officers, the aristocratic dunces ordered the subordinate personnel out to the Senate Square of the Northern Capital. The soldiers were kept all day exposed to the December frost. The general who rode his white horse to the square with admonishments was shot at and killed by a civilian revolutionary. In the dusk of approaching night the government forces brought a cannon, fired it, the soldiers ran to their barracks to get warm at last before the lights-out.

In short, 5 Decemberists were hanged (13? what 13? I tell, you 5 Decemberists got capital punishment!), the frostbitten soldiers got their whipping to feel warmer, the infected taken to the Siberia, like, to do hard labor, yet allowed to hire houses and live with their wives coming from Russia. That way the Spook of Revolution began to roam not Europe alone. After the aforesaid kick-off those subjects to the Russian Empire prone to blues and having nothing better to amuse themselves with got a modish plaything – the struggle for bringing nearer the just bright future without any oppressed and suffering individuals but with immense compulsory happiness instead.

By the end of the 2nd century its acting on the stage of History, Russian Empire obviously fell short of breath selling a sizable swathe of its territories in Northern America to the USA for 9 million rubles, some transaction incongruent with the Empire rank. And when even the toy state of Japan won the day in the war against the giant Russia, Messrs. Obolensky, Rzhevsky and scions of divers other aristocratic families were faced with oncoming Great October Revolution (GOR), to wit, stepping down and giving up the job of hegemonic class and subsequent obliteration at hands of uncouth masses of plowmen headed by fiery revolutionaries from the Jewish national minority.

On the 4th year of the WWI, in February 1917, the concluding Emperor of Russia abdicates his throne. The power passes to the Interim Government which at ones get in the coma of parliamentary bickering between a whole bunch of political parties old and new. The IG announces that Russia still will keep loyal to its allies in the war. “The War Till the Victorious End!” was not good news for German Empire fighting against the alliance of Russia, Great Britain and France. Even under the burden of war efforts, German leadership finds time and means to contact V. I. Lenin in the neutral Switzerland and offer him a long tourist trip in a special “sealed” train by the route thru all of Germany, neutral states of Scandinavia, then via Finland to the destination railway station in Petrograd (previously St. Petersburg). Why? Well, another example of German notorious propensity to philanthropy, they saw a man who pines away in Zurich, Switzerland, could those sentimentalists not take him over to his Homeland, eh?

A nondescript before Lenin’s arrival to Petrograd, the party of Bolsheviks gets notably energized, he makes speeches calling for the Global Revolution, writes his famous *April Theses* of practical instructions how to do the job. There appear means by the party to purchase the necessary equipment for holding armed demonstrations in July. Yet, whenever they kick up shooting, Lenin happens to be in some other place due to his health conditions and he even is late for the Great October Revolution so that it has to be headed by Trotsky, aka Bronstein.

Busy as he is, Leo Davidovich still finds a spare room for Lenin in the Smolny Institution of Noble Maidens (the seat of the putsch coordinators, hired because of…well, yes, maidenhead might incite weird wishes and reactions, it’s hard to propose a wholesome explanation here, no, you never can tell what urges to expect because of the membrane) teeming with lice-peckered crowd of hitmen full of revolutionary enthusiasm. The forked out room has a window presenting a view on the adjacent alleys in the park and truckloads of departing mission groups to seize Telegraph, Telephone or another Railway station. Yes, the State Bank is already secured (as advised in *April Theses*). Then the Interim Government gets arrested and the historical round of decree-promises—Land to Peasants! Factories to Workers! Peace to Peoples!—fired off. Russia enters 5 years of the most atrocious Civil War.

The revolutionary government (multi-partied as of yet, each of the parties split by internal frictions) moves to Moscow. Trotsky boards an iron-clad train and choo-chooes off to command (strategically) divers fronts of the flaring up war (“Peace to Peoples!»). Lenin stays back to tune up paper work in the newly created bureaucratic apparatus (the 58 volumes of Complete Works still not amassed.)

Some young and full of revolutionary romanticism hit-girl, a certain Kaplan (what's in the name? nothing until you learn to read the names) from the especially unsatisfied fraction of the Social-Revolutionary party (SRs), visits a meeting where Lenin makes another of his speeches. She shoots and hits his shoulder. SRs had enough grounds for dissatisfaction, their party was always there before the Bolshies' maiden making their bones. The royal family was SR's traditional hunting grounds, a Czar or 2 scored, not to mention a slew of ministers. How not to be jealous of the green horns whose main, if not the only, asset is close connections among the criminal world? In the beginning of their political career, so as to keep the party's accounts well balanced, Bolsheviks specialized in robbing banks by hands-on instructions from the underground advisors (young Stalin, freshly from the Tiflis seminary, was notably proficient in that line). The activity grew obsolete because of the huge grant from an anonymous friend by the end of the WWI but the connections remained.

The shot by Kaplan marked the start of establishing one-party political system in the country taking course towards building of Socialism with Human Face. She was arrested at the crime scene and taken to the Kremlin, put against the fortress wall of ancient brickwork and executed. The case of Kaplan indicated the end to soft czarist times of prolonged court sessions and talk-work of attorneys at their competitions in eloquence. Technically, it took 2 slobs, 1 shot fired thru her head and 1 barrel full of lime to dump the body into. Not what you call gentlemanly attitude, however, the act (and many other of the sort) efficiently prevented appearance of any revolutionary-minded clandestine groupings in the oncoming USSR, with proper timely repetition of the proceedings.

Who won in the GOR? An interesting question, yet, given the invisibility of some parts it's easier to see who lost. Gentry and bourgeoisie were wiped away as classes, the church never managed to built non-secular state in Russia, they always were a go-between, not builders. 6 - 1 - 1 - 1 = 3. Yes, Classes 4 thru 6 remained of whom They announced workers and peasants the winners (much later the formula was added with "working intelligentsia" all sorts of doctor-engineer-writer-composers, you know, which never were considered a class but inter-layer between classes).

But what was then? Regaining their senses after the bloodbath in the Civil War, the plowmen saw that the land still did not belong to those who worked on it. They tried at uprising a couple of times, however, without the hereditary military around (gentry were wiped out already) what could they do against the regular Red Army, eh? The uprisings were quenched with poison gas stockpiled at the WWI times and nobody wanted any more to go up against the collectivization, the people were fettered to land by the workingmen sons donned in the Red Army uniform. That way the winning class (invisible) neutralized the basic force that secured the GOR victory.

As for the revolutionary ferment, all those commissars and the rest of heroes of other nationality affiliation they were an easy crack. Great Purge was set off. The peasant-proletarian fists were deforming the arrested, crushing teeth, beating out the ear drums and, eventually confessions of collaborating with 3 different imperialistic intelligent services as minimum, while the officiary kept his hands clean piling up another file of documents. Because you cannot go against the nature and execution is not so painful… Anything still live and thinking was systematically taken, in millions, to the camps within the Polar Circle where the Arctic Nature conditions did

their job with no less efficiency but cheaper, than gas chambers. The class of workers, naturally absolutely forgot that factories were theirs...

Now, below the disguising red placards about the victory of workers and peasants They gained absolute power. What secured the victory of Class 6? Subtle calculations and flawless execution of strategical planning? Fuck, no! Do not make yourself an idol. Class 6 is just a class having as many idiots as any other, they hang on an elementary plagiarism. Even such Genius of Strategy as I. V. Stalin needed an instructive master-class-for-dummies "Night of Long Knives" from advanced Germany to aid him in planning the assassination of S. M. Kirov before the New Year night.

Now, after 7 decades of keeping people at the level of mental activities framed by turnkey-prisoner relations, the great nation turned into the 1/6 alcoholic part of the world where master-thieves and ministers are corporately doing their mutual business while those who can understand it dream of fleeing behind-the-hill. But it does not work. It won't work because over there the power is in hands of invisible, invincible other-Siders and They since long pushed forward the slogan "Bureaucrats of the World get Globalized!"… Your read your Pynchon more attentively, not only passages about generative orgies and scatological excesses…

— Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, and what's the meaning of "excesses"?

— Fuck you! You're still here? On-duty detail! Take the motherfucker to the clink!

~ ~ ~

My the small kitchenette provided a lofty crow's nest of a good vantage point to observe the big-big world about it. And in that same kitchenette, I felt the need for some sort of a plan to say my gentle "good-bye" to Konotop…

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~ ~ ~ The Postscripts

The decision to part with Konotop became irreversible when I saw that everything was repeating itself... Over again I walked along a tunnel cut thru the stratum of night darkness with batteries of floodlights on the pylons in the classification yard over my usual short-cut marked by the dim glitter of railheads in the dampish rows of tired tracks.

The tunnel was higher and wider than the galleries in the mine "Dophinovka" and, unlike to the scanty pair of narrow gauge rails, the mighty tracks were bifurcating, multiplying, flowing alongside each other crammed with freight cars, cisterns, platforms with all sorts piled up, covered and uncovered, overall and small, cinched and loosely poured, stuff. Clanging at the railway points, the rolling cars rolled down the hump in strings, in pairs, singly, to find their way in the bowl and, with the pitched screech of wheel chocks, come to a halt at their destinations.

The classification yard has no weekend breaks. On and on sounded the round-the-clock rumbling, clanging, screeching, shouts from the loudspeakers reporting about the numbered tracks and marshaled trains. Yet, all that went on in a tunnel, in one huge tunnel. Would the roof withstand the weight of the night?

In that autumnal, like in lots of other nights, darkness I crossed the railways following the all-too-well-learned network of service paths, bypassing the maze of the stilled trains and dodging the cars rolling down the hump across my route to the ever open wide breach in the wall around PMS-119. I cringed in anticipating disgust at the mud and puddles lurking in that hole which was already at a stone throw because I now walked already alongside the meter-tall letters in the inscription on the concrete wall. Made with ever-black tar over the light gray concrete of fencing by the assured strokes of a brush in the hand of master, it advised the passengers on trains that passed by in the daylight: "Konotop – the city of nondrinkers!"

The floodlights from behind transfixed my moving shadow over the calligraphic graffiti. The closer to the hole, the smaller the size of the silhouette with swaying hat brims until all of it got swallowed by the pitch-black darkness in the breach... The time machine is a nice invention, yet if you can't afford it try traveling the time on foot. Now, following my disappeared shadow, I'll get in such medieval swamps and darkness that…

"Sophocles! Aeschylus!"

Hell! Seems like I've taken a too wide stride and glided by down to the antiquity, ain't I?

"Aeschylus!"

A black shadow about 20 meters from the breach roared hoarsely in the muddy darkness of the PMS backyards. Mine? No, this one shorter and plumper. And in a leather cap, the coat's also of leather. "Why pulled up? Who called you? As if you may have the slightest notion of Sophocles."

"Right you are. I never went deeper than Aristophanes."

He hiccupped and, slightly rolling but resolutely, stepped in my way. "Who are you?" demanded he with the hooch on his breath.

"A passer-by. And what brought you here?"

He seemed to miss my question. "Sophocles... Aeschylus.." he kept echoing softly. "Yes, yes... Aeschylus... Aristophanes! And who else?!"

"Well, there also is some Euripides."

"Right! Euripides!" cried he out with tears in his voice and then again devotedly groaned out, "Sopho-ocles!"

We stood to face each other like Sancho Panza and Don Quixote meeting after the separation. Sancho gave out a despondent sob and dropped his head. The peak of the leather cap pecked me in the bridge of the nose. Damn it, Sancho! Look out! My visor's up...

"I'm an artist," he plaintively imparted, raising his head. "They gave me 2 months here…" Another nod with the pesky peak...

I see, 2 months from Narco-2 for eradication of all alcoholic inclinations. And now I also knew whose masterpiece in tar was out there. Eh, Sancho, Sancho!. Anyone would turn a drunk if there's no one to talk to of Sophocles!. Armfuls of pearls and no one to scatter them before... No, no, no! I do have to leave…

...to go there, beyond the horizon, to the faraway—as childhood—seashore by the smooth azure waters, and a mighty sacred Oak tree with its hollow for whispering into it the quotations hardly needed by anyone along with the names of sages forgotten ages ago…

The plan was perfect. But what about the details? For instance, where to? Well, firstly, it should be some warm place, enough of frostbites for me, and secondly, it has to be provided with the sea and mountains. The Crimea, whose mountains are not that tall, does not fit, besides, it's taken up by Olga, maybe...

The finger slides over to the next sea on the map... Yeah? Okay, to Baku then. What's the difference?.

Getting my vacation from the Construction Workshop Floor at the "Motordetail" plant, I also applied for dismissal. Yet, before moving away I still had one unfinished business on my hands. It was my promise to the 3 strangers at the station restaurant to visit the city of Lvov…

The closer to Lvov the slower the train traveled along the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains with dark tall Fir trees, yet in the late evening it still arrived at its destination... In the automatic storage cell, I left my briefcase in which, besides the hygienic necessities, there also lurked a gray cap of thick woolen fabric, so that to travel thru the city lightly and in my inseparable secret agent's hat.

Lvov always was a beautiful city with lots of monuments and landmarks of ancient architecture on streets with cobblestone pavement. No wonder that the 4-sequel Soviet adaptation of "The Three Musketeers" was shot in that city. They only needed to keep the camera away from the streetcar rails in the road.

I did not use any kind of transportation in Lvov but walked. Where to? To the Opera House, of course. My promise was fulfilled, I did come to Lvov, but I had no intention to run about its streets demanding of the passers-by, "Were you, by any chance, in Konotop 2 years ago, after you served your time in Zone?" No, I am from a different category, and I strolled in a well-bred manner to have a good time because the train to Kiev was leaving exactly at midnight…

The Opera House in Lvov was a magnificent sight, simply a palace; well done the Poles who built it. However, as for having a good time my guess was premature. There was an opera on, a creation by a local classical composer about the peasant unrest in the 16th century. A piece of trash in the style of "they'll lap it up!" Anyway, if a job is once begun, never leave it till it's done, and I sat tight thru all of it to the final bell which set me free…

By midnight, I was back to the station, unlocked the automatic storage cell and opened my briefcase. I doffed my hat and put it inside the cell, then clapped the gray cap from the briefcase onto my head. After those manipulations, I gently closed the door and even chortled softly imagining the goggled eyes of the next user of the same cell. You open the door and see a solitary hat sitting there without a head inside. Go and think of what to think…

On return to Konotop, I started the farewell visits. To my brother Sasha on Sosnowska Street. To my sister Natasha in the 9-story block in At-Seven-Winds... I did not go to Decemberists 13 though, I was a stupid jackass.

Natasha gave me a rich present of a winter coat of gray cloth with karakul fur collar. Apparently, the size did not fit her husband Guena, I was the coat size.

And I also went to ZAGS to get the stamp in my passport on divorce with Eera. Yet, they sent me to Nezhyn ZAGS, the place of marriage registration. However, at Nezhyn ZAGS they demanded a reference from Konotop People's Court that our marriage was terminated.

“Look," said I, "you made the record of our divorce when she was getting her stamp, give me my stamp on that ground and that's it."

"There is no such record. She never came to us."

That how they stroke me dumb. I had to go to Konotop, to get the reference at the People's Court and take it back to Nezhyn. Shuttling in local trains hither-thither, I thought whether the mileage I had ridden on trains would equal the Equator. And I also thought: why did Eera, in so many years, not get her passport stamped to certify our divorce? Probably, to sprinkle a pinch of spice to her lays, sort of adding fresh twigs to the antler of her absent husband, the cuckold of a geologist.

And then I realized why I always liked the scene of D'Artagnan farewell to Rochefort in the Dumas novel *Twenty Years Later*.

> ***"Go your way, old devil," D'Artagnan said with a sad smile, still looking after the departed Rochefort. "Go. Makes no difference. No Constance is there anymore..."***

I realized, that Constance was Eera and me, only not separately, but together. Constance was us in those silly times when we were still tormenting each other with our love…

Then I went to the city of Sumy. There I took Lenochka to the cinema. The "Fanfan the Tulip" movie it was, yet already with Alain Delon starring in it.

After the cinema we fed the swans in the park, dropping from the arched bridge crumbs of cabbage piroshki, and then we went to a restaurant. Everything there was a discovery for her...

She saw me off at the station and burst into tears for a farewell. She looked beautiful, like her mother, and only the hair she took after me.

~ ~ ~

Next day I went to 25, Gogol Street and left by Sasha Plaksin my black dembel "diplomat" case loaded with dictionaries and a couple of books. We arranged he would send it to me when I settle down somewhere and let him know my address... Konotop saw me off with angry cold and wind, but the coat from Natasha kept me warm, and I went to Nezhyn to return the book of stories by Salinger borrowed from Zhomnir. I locked the sports-bag with clothes and other things into an automatic storage cell at the station and with just my briefcase went to Shevchenko Street.

When the bell rang, the door did not open, probably, Zhomnir and Maria Antonovna walked out somewhere to visit. I went to the city center, to the new "Kosmos" cinema opposite the department store. There was some garbage produced by "Uzbek-film" about Sindbad the Seaman, but I just needed to kill the time.

I sat down and planted the briefcase under the seat. The place on the left was taken by a woman of my age. In the tilted passage on the right, a girl about four was running up and down. Her mother, sitting in the front rows, called for her to come back, but the kid did not listen. She kept capering there, and at each of male spectators entering the hall she yelled, "Daddy!" But he was not among them... A couple of rows higher, to seven o'clock, there were seated 2 military pilots in officer jackets. One of then began to greet my neighbor on the left, but somehow with the owner's air and in a certain double bottom way.

The movie started, and Sindbad switched from the sea to a cave, to fencing a saber next to the ruins of the ancient walls of Samarkand against the background of a high-voltage power line... Finally, that all was over, I lifted my cap from my knees and clapped it on my head. The neighbor on the left dropped her thin gloves into the lap of my coat.

"Take it," she said softly. "Escort me." I angled my briefcase from under the seat and began to squeeze after her thru the crowd.

In a rather dense stream of moviegoers, we descended the high exit stairs outside. The officers-pilots were waiting down in their forage caps. As we were passing by, they did not even dare to peep. Did not get the nerve to. Meaningful dress code works like a charm in the aware milieu. First, the karakul collar, to which they would hardly grow, in the Soviet army such collars were prerogative of Colonels and higher ranked Commanders. Secondly, my gray, brand new, cap in the style favored by *zeks* after their second term in Zone. Not to mention the equally new briefcase…

She invited me to tea. It was not far, in the five-story block on the slope from the main square. I walked and the location was getting more and more familiar to me. Really? It cannot

be...Exactly! She opened with her key the apartment where once the black-haired KGBist arranged a meeting for me and his boss in the stylish gray hair haircut above his tanned face. But now the apartment was furnished and lived in.

We took our coats in the hallway and went over to the living room. On the coffee table in front of the folding coach-bed, instead of tea, she served a bottle of wine, sliced sausage, and chocolate sweets. I drank wine, snacked chocolate and remembered the crane operator Vitalya.

We did not ask each other's names. For what we were there "you" was enough. True, she couldn't resist boasting about having a position at the prosecutor's office. Without specifying my profession, I assured her they wouldn't run me down in her beat.

Then she went into the bedroom and came back in a long unbuttoned dressing gown. She sat next to me on the folding coach-bed again. I hugged her, ran my hand under the gown collar around her neck until reached and unfastened the bra on her blades. Her face flashed up with joy. We went over to the bedroom…

What followed might be compared to the demonstration performances of champions in figure skating, the simile to match her graceful physique. Like well-trained partners, we accurately and precisely entered all those supports, triple two-loops, and other program elements. Of all the program, that two-loops element was especially advantageous for outlining the shapely curves in her slender body. We moved from figure to figure with fancy changes of tempo and on-the-fly improvisation in combinations, and continued to conquer the hearts of absent spectators with the outstanding degree of perfection in our inimitable performance.

The world around, under, and above got wrapped with the misty veil of the delightfully sweet bliss and stuff of ashes being hauled... It's only that concurrent with the ripples in the stream of sensuality, but absolutely discordant to the thrills of our carnal delights and skillfully adroit ecstatic raptures, there time and again splashed up both sketchy and irrelevant glimpses of a f-f..er..frisking puppy, Tuzik... full of sportive ardor, he was happily gnawing a rubber hot-water bottle in an unidentifiable nook. Which Tuzik?! What rubber bottle on Earth had anything to do with the triumphs of our vigorously deft calisthenics? All the proceedings were, in fact, a streamlined execution of the program I was fed in thru a novel by Carpentier from a recent issue of *Vsesvit*. There too, the protagonist, before going to Spain to fight in the ranks of the International Brigades against General Franco, was having sex with his girlfriend 3 times in their farewell night…

In the morning she, at last, made tea, and I called Zhomnir to tell that I brought his book and was on my way to his place. However, I did not go to Zhomnir at once. I returned to the Gogol Greens and entered a hairdresser's in the adjoining cobweb of old streets.

They did not expect to have so an early customer, yet one of the hairdressers agreed to shave me. That young make-believe hairdresser of a gypsy girl nicked my throat for more than once. At each scratching, she said "oh!" and rubbed the cut with pliable alum. And she even had the nerve to grab the fee after!.

I again passed the Gogol Greens and entered School 7. There were classes going on and silence reigned in the deserted corridors. In the Teachers' Room, I said to the few women present there that I wanted to see Liliana Ogoltsova from a second grade, whose dad I was.

One of the women came out into the empty corridor with me and led to the classroom in question. She went in and returned with a girl I did not know, her ashy hair in the pair of tight plaits, wearing a gray knitted blouse with thin transverse stripes in its front, who obstinately kept her eyes away.

"This is the girl," said the teacher, "but she says she does not have a dad."

"That's right," I answered fighting back the anger at I did not know what, which rolled up from nowhere. "Would you call ‘father’ the one who shows up once in 5 years just to say ‘goodbye’?" The teacher tactfully walked off to the nearby windowsill.

I opened my briefcase and went down on one knee next to you so that we were even. You did not look at me. "Liliana," I called, took out from my briefcase the folded *Morning Star*, and handed it to you. "Pass it to your mother, please."

You accepted the newspaper and stood on silently, staring at the floor.

"All right, Lee," said I, "Go back to your class."

You turned with relief and walked to the door of your classroom. I got up from my knee and watched as the door swallowed both you and the newspaper, where between the printed pages there was an enlarged portrait of Eera standing in the summer stream, and the sparse bunch of all the postcards I received, as well as the telegrams, about how you 2 loved me and congratulated on my birthday or the Day of the Soviet Army…

~ ~ ~

I handed Salinger to Zhomnir and, in return, I asked for James Joyce's Ulysses, 705 pages of dense text without pictures, without divisions into parts or chapters. Zhomnir himself once wanted to translate it, but Joyce turned out way too unsuitable for any conjuncture. I gave my word to return the volume in 10 years.

After a split-second hesitation, he brought the book out of his archive chamber and stretched it generously out. Now I had what with to fill the eternity ahead of me.

"Where are you going?" asked Maria Antonovna.

"To Baku."

With the usual jerk, the train pulled out of the Nezhyn railway station... Everything was behind, ahead was everything. 30 and 3 years.

"It's time for you to work miracles," said I to a saxophonist I knew, when he became 33.

"I have already done miracles," he replied, "And did my time for them as well." And how only do them folks manage to live eventful lives?

I thought that I was going to Baku to pick up a job of a bricklayer of the fourth category, and gradually translate Ulysses after work. As it turned out, I was starting to the Mountainous Karabakh with its war for independence and all the issuing details common for such cases, which I'd rather not dwell on. However, behind the windows of the local train car, there still were running familiar landscapes of 1987, the last year of peace. Before the collapse of the indestructible Union of the Free Republics, there still remained 2 years. Today, they tell me that in 1987 the smack of the new era was in the air already. Alas, I did not scent the brew.

> (...what was the underlying reason for the collapse of the USSR? The Union was finished off by "The Guys on the Roadside". So was named the English TV movie of 4 sequels about the life of British unemployed.
>
> The censors at the Central Television in Moscow did not get it that at the end of that week an electrician at the "Motordetail" plant would say: "I have been working all my life, and so has my wife. Our son returned from the army and he also works now. We have a two-room apartment, and their unemployed live in two-story cottages! Fuck!" The magic power of art touched the living strings in the heart of a Konotop mujik, triggering the chain reaction that changed the face of the world.
>
> Has it changed its essence, or was it just a case of plastic surgery?..)

Let some other "I", not a part to my personal monad, strain their brains about this question, because I since long dropped following the brandy lies in this world. Moreover, the predawn twilight, seeping thru the synthetic canvass of my Chinese tent, signals the end to this sleepless night and to this endless letter as well.

You will ask, how did my following life flow, behind the watershed of the Caucasian ridge? You may not even ask it, I will tell you all the same. First, do not ask about my life in the past tense, it still keeps flowing on. I rolled its way as best as I could. Because of the spiral nature of the current, we can only go thru multiple repetitions of what has been and will be.

"What has been will be again," says the new translation of the Old Testament, and Vladimir Dahl in his dictionary recorded the same saying in normal, human, language – "radish is no sweeter than a horseradish". But, if I may ask, have all those wisdom pieces helped a single anyone? And when there comes the moment to feel that I don't care a f-f..er..fleck, I let it rip and go with the flow to the ultimate end.

Life is predetermined like a winding mountain road with the drop-off on the right and the cliff-wall on the left, here you go along, repeating step by step the path passed before you, by you who was also "I". Of course, when I recognize a repetition of familiar situations, I try to avoid

ugly deeds for which I'll be ashamed painfully. And up till now I, like, have managed to dodge. Or?.

Yes, like, haven't stepped… If only that bitter son of a bitch in my Chinese tent wouldn't unearth something else...

So, here we are – I and the Varanda. It goes to meet the Araks river and I am passing by and on, to the last limit beyond which there's the boundless blue sea and, probably, that, once lost, tiny sailing boat in it…

Something again carries me off to all sorts of epochs and philologies. But this is, after all, a private letter of a father to his daughter, and f-f..er..I mean, fairly didactic too, well… sort of… at certain passages… Seems like it's a high time to wind up already.

> ***...and then the morning of the following day came, and Scheherazade was suffered to live that day also...***

And about myself, dear daughter, I may report that the maxim "I know that I know nothing" is not applicable to me, though there were times when I also scattered this particular pearl. Today, however, I have serious doubts about having even so tiny scraps of knowledge. I doubt that I know anything at all, be it even nothing.

"We understand life only by looking back at the past," announced a lover of aphorisms.

Asshole! You will not understand it even when pulled out of the grave and poked into it with your noseless skull!. And no one will ever understand…

There's just one thing beyond any doubt – life is shorter than even the dash between the dates of birth and death. And I do not care that no one cares about my useless wisdom, because I know better than anyone else that after all that was there, after my stupidities and mistakes, after stepping in all sorts of shit, I am not a hair-breadth wiser, I am still the same naive sucker ready to get underway to the unseen Where-Where Mountains. And let the hull is old like hell, the mast all cracks, and this whole nutshell will not survive the nearest storm – ahead, at full tilt! And let another calypso or penelope (what's the difference?) tearing the blouse on her charms, cries out and rushes along the foamy water edge – full ahead!.

I know that the bigger part of the dash is over so, come what may, the final leg would be passed as well, perk up – we'll prick thru for sure! Like hell will anything stop a hooey-pricker!.

Good-bye, sweetie.

My fatherly hug to you. And, since you are fond of "You" in the plural –

With love,

your daddies: Sehrguey and Nikolayevich.

(...and whichever rumors reach you, stay assured – we lived happily ever after and died on the same day...)

P. S.:

In case you will give birth to a baby-son – look out! And if you notice an excessive interest for paper, or if instead of games in the computer he starts playing with text typing, then wrap him in a white cloth and throw into the fast-running River-Mommy and he'll only say "thank you!" afterward.

P. P. S.:

I almost forgot to warn that any coincidence with the names of real persons is purely accidental and the described events – fictitious because there is no one responsible for the unpredictably weird dreams of another life-long graphomaniac—

thru the night of 20 to 21 August 2007,

on the left bank of the Varanda River...

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